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What Kind of Questions Should We Ask if We Are Hiring a Coach?

Premise

A lot of organizations I work with have a need to hire coaches to support their transformation. Generally I find this is a two-stage process where the first interview is basically a first pass filter aimed at just determining basic skills while the second interview is a more evaluative discussion. The question is "what approach should we use to drive this second conversation?"

The following sections talk about some questions I've used in the past to help me understand fit.

What Questions Should We Ask Prospective Team Coaches?

The approach I've found useful is to set a more "situational" discussion. The idea is to have a a series of driving questions where there really is no right or wrong answer, but that the discussion will help uncover the thinking process, the framework, the person you are talking to has.

Here are some questions that I have used to start that discussion:

- "You are working with 3 teams. There is nothing urgent going on at the moment. What does your day look like?" Looking for "gemba" (go an see), willingness to "leave alone", researching "the next thing teams will need".
- "Two of your teams are having troubles coordinating dependencies with each other. Both teams have people on the team that blame each other for the failure. How do you work the situation?" Looking for "get them into a room to focus on jointly solving the problem.
- "One of your teams are having troubles coordinating dependencies with another outside group that is not doing agile. How do you work the situation?" Looking for establishing regular communication on dependency and upfront agreement.
- "Management has come to you with the perception that one of the teams you are working with are not performing. How would you deal with this situation?" Looking for review from both ends – management's perception of the problem and team's perception of the problem. Also an approach acknowledging the potential politics of the situation.
- "Your teams are performing well, improving, but have totally different ways of working. Management is asking that work be standardized. What would your approach be to this situation?" Looking for understanding that some things need to be standardized and leading approach through deciding what makes sense (eg standardize rollup reporting without standardizing work, standardizing certain architectural components, etc).

- "One of your teams has been operating using a Kanban approach. Someone on the team is suggesting that they move to Scrum. What kind of discussion would you facilitate with this team?" Looking for understanding of differences, understanding combination approach leading to discussion of current problem person suggesting is trying to solve.
- "You've completed a training course / coaching engagement with a team over the period of a couple of days. From your perspective, the sessions seemed to go well. After the session, the manager of one of the people involved in the session sends out an email blasting the session – how the participant learned the wrong things and were not engaged in the session. How would you deal with this situation?" (Looking for acknowledgement that the problem might be with the coach and / or session in addition to working the issue directly (gemba) with the manager and participant).
- "You are working with a team of people. A private conversation develops where the another coach or manager says 'Did you see that (laughter) …' The issue is valid – there is a problem. What do you do?" (Looking for respect for people discussion with the person. People feel disrespect.)
- "You are coaching a team where the people are not following standard user voice format (as a, I want, so that) user story format when they draft up stories. The team has received training and have been working using the agile approach for a couple of months. Their last retrospective resulted in a discussion on writing an automatic test for the first time, as they realized that they are doing too much manual testing and they have come to you for advice. How would you approach this discussion?" (Looking for a discussion on understanding where people are and an incremental approach to improvement, not a view of right and wrong ways to do something. Or perhaps they are capturing the essence of stories (value) without using format so it doesn't matter)
- "You are coaching a Team's initial retrospective. What format does the retrospective take? What things are you looking to do while you are facilitating this ceremony?" Looking for something more than "what went well", "what didn't go well" type discussion and something more along the lines of How do we run our first retrospective (in other words, making sure that we don't go straight into "solution mode" and take time to understand the problem) using tools like "Cause-Effect" diagrams if warrented. Also looking for awareness that Scrum Master should be doing this and so part of this facilitation is to ensure also mentoring the Scrum Master.
- "You are Coaching in a multi-team situation and you have just completed their first joint planning event (ala PI Planning or Big Room Planning) which was regarded as successful for all concerned. What kinds of things are you looking for as a coach?" Looking for something beyond "help facilitate key collaboration ceremonies" to more focus on execution of the work (eg help get first feature / objective delivered to get into the habit), and preparation for the next joint planning event, retrospective, etc.
- Bonus question: "What was the last book you read?" Coaches need to be constantly learning. Books, blogs, etc are an indicator of this.

What Questions Should We Ask Prospective Transformation Coaches?

Sometimes you are at the beginning of a transformation for an organization and so the issues you are working with are more related to working the initial contacts with a leadership team. Here are some questions that you might ask in this situations:

- "You are working with a new organization, you've ask for a 3-day workshop to introduce the new approach, and they've allowed you 4 hours. How do you use that 4 hours?" Looking for approach that gets you to the workshop that you really think they need. In particular, want to ensure that you don't end up trying to do 3 day workshop in 4 hours. And ideas on how you could focus the session on one or two key ideas.
- "Describe a situation where you are working with a leadership group that are at odds over something - perhaps there is a discussion about the future of the agile roll out and people in the room are trying to see 'where they will end up' which is effecting the decisions. How did you facilitate?" Looking for decision where facilitation lead to approach that people agreed to try. "How did you clarify next steps?" is a possible follow on question - trying to avoid different interpretations of "the decision".
- "What was the last organizational / coaching experiment you ran and what was the result?" Looking for a degree of comfort in risk taking, and understanding of how an experiment works (PDCA applied to the subject at hand). You will sometimes see people take a while to answer this which implies that they have not really been thinking about their coaching in this way.
- "If you were to hire a coach, what would you look for and how would you prioritize the skills / values". Looking for discussion more about characteristics, personality and approach. For example, "someone who is comfortable working with the CIO in the morning, and a team in the afternoon." Also looking for some specific discussion around ability to manage client expectations, approach to work yourself out of a job, ability to find where people are at in client organization and start from there, and so on. Values and philosophy are part of this - see Coaches Values and Principles for some thinking.
- "The organization you are working with has read a lot about agile and are working to form teams. They understand the idea of a "two pizza team" but are struggling to form these teams in all cases. How would you convince the organization that having large teams is OK?" (Looking for a "non-religious" discussion of a principle that a lot of people think is basic. Aim is to focus on what works for the business. Typically interested in more thought out approaches, than just following standard thinking. Note: this might not be what you want in your transformation - it has been important in some I've worked. And this might be a useful type of question to ask of all coaches).
- "You are about to facilitate a leadership workshop, involving 20 people of the extended leadership team. If I were to walk into the room where you are facilitating, what would I see? How would you conduct a session like this?" Looking for an environment set up for collaboration and joint decision making. Walls marked of with things like "Meeting Objectives", "Working Agreements", "Parking Lot", "Retrospective", Kanban version marked "Agenda". Room set up so that it is collaborative, seating around tables for example rather than classroom style. Perhaps a mention of a co-facilitator to pair with. Perhaps a mention of preparation work required to get there. Perhaps a discussion about engaging people in activities as quickly as possible, minimal use of PowerPoint and so on.

Domain Curiosity or Expertise

All these situational questions make an assumption. The assumption is that as the coach works the situation, they will have developed a level of understanding and expertise in the area they are coaching, the domain. Sadly, in my experience, this is not true. There is no doubt that you can develop the art and skill of being a coach, and develop their knowledge of agile and lean. But if that is where the coach stops

in the learning, then they will be less effective when working with the people in a particular domain.

The "Quick Buzzer" Round

The reasoning is no different to the reasoning behind why leadership is more effective when it has good technical expertise. To quote:

Generally I've found that people I interview about Agile have sufficient information to be reasonably "buzz word compliant". In other words, they know how to use buzzwords in a particular context. But sometimes I try to understand where people have enough detailed knowledge in an area. I've found a buzzer round helps me understand where people are. It also helps me understand how people deal with pressure, and what they do if they don't know the answer to some things.

The way it works is that you introduce the concept by saying "I want to understand where some of your expertise lies and rather than ask detailed questions about everything, will just do a quick buzzer round. The way this works is that I'll say something like 'what does USA stand for, and you'll say ...' and hopefully they'll say "United States of America". "Good. Sometimes questions will be fill in the blank type questions. Ready?

Warm Up Questions

The quick fire round can be seen as high pressure to the person on the receiving end, especially if you use this in an interview situation. It is often useful to start with a couple of softball questions to help get people into the mindset:

- Rolling Stones or Beatles?
- North, South, East, and ????
- Coffee or Tea?
- Left and ????

Lean / Agile Questions

1. Process and tools are less important than ????
2. What is Muda?
3. What are the 3C's?
4. What INVEST attribute would you rank highest?
5. Story points or ideal days?
6. Biggest Agile influence?
7. Last Agile book you read?
8. Autonomy, mastery, ????
9. SAFe or LeSS
10. Book you would recommend to a ScrumMaster?
11. Father of servant leadership?

12. Ideal sprint length?
13. Elevator pitch - "why agile?"
14. 3 retrospective questions?
15. Book you would recommend to an executive?
16. Ideal team size?
17. P, D, C, ????
18. Pivot or ????
19. What is WIP limit of expedite lane?
20. Non-negotiable practice?
21. Push or pull?

Some Notes on the Interview Process

Over time I've found that some things really help as you work the interview process:

- Pair (or mob) interview: In general I've found it way better to at least pair when conducting an interview. What I find is that each person involved in the interview brings a different perspective to the session, and so improves the overall chance of find both good people and recognizing when there is a potential problem.
- Fist-of-five vote: Assuming you have multiple people involved in the interview process, do a fist of five on the person based on a key question. The key question I've used is "Would I go to bat for this person in order to bring them on?" but the question you use might be different based on your needs. The key point is to have people agree on this question before doing the interview so there is a common expected outcome. Other driving questions I've heard are "Would this person be able to hit the ground running?" or "Would I like to work with this person?", or something more focused on organizational values like "Do I think this person will take responsibility for problems?"
- Prepare: Preparation means that the conversation will be more structured and so provides a better chance to cover what needs to be covered.
- Have a way to get to "no": No matter what your approach to the interview, make sure you have identified things that would lead you to say no to a particular person. If your discussion does not allow clear differentiation between people you'd like to bring on board and those you wouldn't, then you probably need to work the questions.
- Use video: Remote interviews are done with an audio call. Since most communication is not verbal, you are missing out a lot if you do not use video.
- Provide immediate feedback: I've found that sometimes I form an impression based on an initial response that was not intended by the person. I usually end up an interview (if it has not already been discussed) by asking "do you want to hear what I am thinking?" This gives people a chance to modify their response, but also to improve their future interviews. This is probably not a normal thing to do in an interview, but the coaching situation is often not so much about "knowledge" but rather about cultural fit. If you set the interview up with this in mind, then the feedback is not about a lack in the person, but rather about a perceived problem of fit.

Want to Know More?

- Agile Coaches Competencies paper from the Agile Coaching Institute.
- What Are The Characteristics of a Great Agile Coach
- What You Need To Know Before Hiring Fraudulent Coaches blog post
- What Are Some Good "Quick Fire" Round Questions We Can Ask to Assess Agile Knowledge
- Can you be a great leader without technical expertise? which, while written for leadership, I believe has similar implications for coaching.

Consultant, Tools, Role, Coach, FAQ

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