FUNDAMENTALS

What is a coaching culture?

Creating a coaching culture is more than just creating coaching capability. It's about creating an organization that identifies success with the ability to learn, adapt and grow through the talents of its people.

In a world coming to terms with the pace of change, disruptive technologies and global socio-political shifts, no organization can afford to rest on its laurels. Business strategy now focuses on innovation and design thinking in markets that are seeing 180 degree pivots. Aligning your business strategy with culture is the smart thing to do. In this chapter we explore in Part A what is meant by a coaching culture. In Part B we consider how to create a vision.

PART A: COACHING CULTURE DEFINED

What is culture?

Before we begin our journey together in creating a coaching culture we need to establish what we mean by some core concepts. You might be familiar with the term 'coaching' or you might not. Similarly, your professional development might have included exposure to the concept of culture or it might not. We make no assumptions about prior knowledge. We often use verbal shorthand to imply meaning as if it were universally understood. The word 'culture' is one of these shorthand words – even though culture can and does mean different things to different people depending on the context. At the beginning of our journey to creating a coaching culture it's worth exploring what we mean by culture and posing the question to you. How do *you* define culture?

Nancy's story below gives us a snapshot of how culture manifests itself in everyday working situations. Behind the scenes we can surmise that there is a basic set of assumptions that are shared by the organization, and in this

case the board, to shape the way it operates on a day-to-day basis. The fact that these assumptions have persisted over time creates and perpetuates the culture experienced by Nancy.

Nancy was the HR director of an electronics organization and had been in her role for four years. Each year we went through the same ritual: Nancy would make coffee and I would listen whilst she downloaded her frustrations about the board, the managers, the cuts in budget and her disappointment about the results of the annual staff survey. I would nod empathetically and when she had got it out of her system we would then sit down to put together the annual training plan.

Over the last year I had noticed her growing in confidence in her role and becoming less satisfied with the status quo. Having worked with the organization and the managers for many years, I felt today might be the time to talk about a different approach. I felt that we weren't really resolving the root causes of some of the strategic problems, but simply putting sticking plaster on them. As Nancy started to talk about the performance management training that was needed for the managers, I put down my pen and asked her 'What is the real problem we are trying to fix with this intervention?'

Nancy thought for a second and then said,

'Accountability – people just don't seem committed to their role and the survey makes many comments about a "blame culture" – I think it is due to our project-based organization. Managers need to ensure that people take responsibility so that we stop getting these project slippages and costly errors.'

'And do you think that the performance review training will resolve this permanently?' I challenged.

'I am sure it will help, she replied, 'but what's the alternative... apart from firing all of the managers who are useless at managing performance?'

In the field of organizational behaviour the term 'culture' has only become more common in the last 20 years or so. Edgar Schein, one of the key exponents in the field, describes it as an 'elusive topic' (Schein, 1990). If you want to explore the topic further, the work of Hofstede (1991) provides a different perspective for comparison. For us, Schein's definition (1985) captures our experiences of what it means to live in an organizational culture:

the deeper level of basic assumptions and beliefs that are shared by members of an organization, that operate unconsciously, and that define in a basic 'taken for granted' fashion an organization's view of itself and its environment.

This describes for us how people experience culture because it captures both the unconscious aspect of being 'assimilated' into the culture and the identity that culture creates. And there's the rub: you can only really define a culture by experiencing it. And that is probably why it is such an elusive beast.

So, one of the challenges for us in exploring how you create a coaching culture is to define the experiences and identity that such an organization might manifest without dictating exactly how that might look and feel to someone on the inside. In doing this, we're adopting one of the coaching principles that each client, in this case the organization as a whole, is fully capable of creating its own solutions. The tools we've created are a vehicle for creating these solutions without directing the answers. Furthermore, your organization will have a different map of the world from any other organization; you will create your own basic set of shared assumptions that make sense to the people within. These assumptions are manifested in what happens in reality; the practices that are common and visible which hint at the assumptions beneath.

We learn from our own experiences that the bigger the organization, the greater the chances of experiencing multiple cultures within the whole. Most organizations operate in the complex space. Complexity by its nature requires emergent practices and an ability to be comfortable with not having all the answers before you start. In creating a culture at scale, the trick is to ensure that the subcultures share sufficient practices and assumptions that link back to the unifying identity. In our experience of working in large multinational organizations, it is possible to have diametrically opposed cultures in different parts of the organization. So, before you begin the journey, take some time to reflect on the culture or cultures within your organization. What are the defining features of those cultures? How do shared assumptions become reality in the day-to-day practices? What sort of policies do you have, how are they applied in practice and how might they hint at the type of the culture?

Accepting that culture is a tricky word to define precisely and succinctly, we offer the simple model below to help 'peel the layers of the onion' of organizational culture.

This model is shorthand to help create a cultural picture of your organization. It is not a definitive or prescriptive model of organizational culture, merely a framework for you to experiment with and adapt. The axes of

FIGURE 1.1 Cultural model
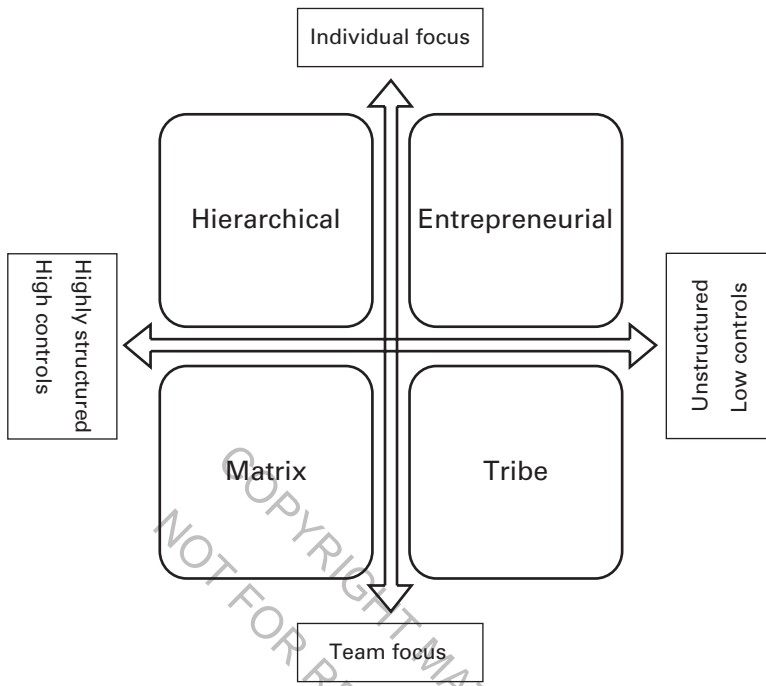
the model may differ depending on how you perceive your experiences of culture. It is intended as a catalyst to help you diagnose and assess the culture within your organization. In our experience, entrepreneurial organizations are usually led by a charismatic leader. They can be all sizes, but the overriding factor is that the leader has usually created or evolved the organization to its current state. To help you here, think of Steve Jobs in Apple or Richard Branson in Virgin. Based on our experiences of these types of culture they typically have less structure and lower controls in place. That's not to say that there aren't processes, it's just that they do not define the work.

In the related culture of tribes there is also lower focus on global control and structure; rather, the tribe is self-directed and creates its own controls. There is also less focus on any one individual and more on the collective kudos of the related tribe. They might form part of a larger organization or be collections of professionals. The controls and processes in place are there to help the tribe make sense of how they work together and the collective view of what's acceptable or not becomes a qualifier for new members to join the tribe. The most obvious examples here are lawyers or accountants,

but it can be any group that shares a common interest in retaining the collective benefits of the tribe.

The next two categories are similar but different; similar in that they both rely on structure and controls to function but different in that hierarchies operate vertically whereas matrixed organizations work horizontally. In other words, one relies on status and the other relies on function. In hierarchical cultures there is likely to be a set grading structure with clear demarcation lines between roles and levels. In matrixed organizations the demarcation lines are around projects or job families.

This simple model can help you identify at a very broad level what type of culture you experience in your organization. As we said before, that doesn't necessarily mean it *is* that type of culture, but it does give you a starting point on which to carry our further investigations. Think of yourself as an organizational anthropologist – your experience of your organization will both inform and shape how you assess your starting point. There are lots of cultural assessment tools on the market to help you get under the skin. Remember, organizations are typically complex. What really matters is what you do with what you learn, how you craft your hypotheses, and test and iterate to make progress. In this book we want to understand what the culture landscape is so that we can craft a journey to a different destination.

Defining the term 'coaching'

Defining culture is the first step but to complete the circle we need to define what we mean by coaching. The definition of coaching varies widely but there are some common themes. Below are some quotations from renowned executive coaches that show the range of the definition:

> The art of facilitating the performance, learning and development of another. (Miles Downey, 1999)

> A conversation, or series of conversations, one person has with another. (Julie Starr, 2003)

> Coaching is an enabling process to increase performance, development and fulfilment. (Graham Alexander and Ben Renshaw, 2005)

We offer our own definition as:

> A conversation where the coach acts as the facilitator to the coachee, so that they learn, gain insight and take action toward a specific and agreed outcome.

Having read these definitions, what might your definition of coaching be? What might other people in the organization say if you were to ask them to define coaching? In our experience managers often confuse coaching with directing and advising.

Empowerment explained

Implicit in the term coaching is the notion of empowerment – that the coachee takes responsibility for their own learning and is ready, willing and able to take action to make progress. When we talk about empowerment in the context of a coaching culture we mean people being empowered to make their own decisions and take responsibility for their actions whilst managers support them through utilizing a coaching style.

We remember a lot of buzz in the business world years ago about the new management phenomenon labelled 'empowerment'. This was the way forward for businesses, the 'holy grail' that all organizations had been looking for! Time to finally shake off all those ingrown roots of control theory management and telling people what to do! Managers were dutifully informed that if they empowered their team and let them make decisions for themselves then life would be easier for them as a manager, performance would be the responsibility of the employee and profits would soar.

Funnily enough, not all employees seemed thrilled at the prospect of having the 'empowerment thing' done to them! The hard and fast cynics who had done several rounds of management initiatives prepared themselves for the inevitable hype that went with the latest HR craze and dampened the spirits of the fresh-faced newer recruits who seemed excited by the prospect.

Gillian remembers working with one enthusiastic MD who bought and distributed to all 300 managers copies of a book he had become extraordinarily excited about – *Zapp! The Lightning of Empowerment: How to Improve Productivity, Quality, and Employee Satisfaction*, by William C Byham (which was indeed a very good read – a fairy story which exposed the fact that empowerment was not just about moving the responsibility to the employee but was a whole mindset for managers that took effort, application and a new skillset):

> I suspect the majority of managers never got to reading those later chapters as
> I came across very few organizations who were anywhere near that wonderful
> Utopia. The cynics in the organizations prophesized that it would never work

and dug their heels in waiting for the next 'management fad' to come along. Managers gradually reverted to learned behaviours – telling people what to do was far quicker and came more naturally than tapping into a person's potential and taking the time to develop them!

Gillian's experience of an organization 'trying' to change culture is not unique. Creating and developing a culture is the role of leaders and the concept of empowerment is exactly what organizations do need and will always need. Most wise managers know that 95 per cent of people can solve their own problems given the right climate to do so and if we can encourage managers to create that climate we are half way towards empowering staff. As we dug deeper into organizations we both separately came to a realization: organizations were, and in our experience still are, struggling to know how to empower people. Yet, every coaching programme that managers have attended will have majored on how to facilitate team members through use of the GROW (Goal Reality Options Will) model or similar models.

So why were organizations still missing the empowerment culture they desired?

The answer lies in some comments from managers attending one of the coaching programmes. Whilst they had enthusiastically practised their skills and agreed with all the theory discussed, in terms of the importance of coaching people, there was still a huge debate about the time issue and the discussion revolved around 'not having time to do it'. As the discussion unfolded, it became apparent that the definition of 'it' was the coaching discussion.

Their definition made it sound as if they had a very demanding and time-consuming job to do and, as a side order, someone had dumped on them a whole load of people who needed to have performance reviews and coaching, which took too much time out of their day. This is not an uncommon view and demonstrates the continuing need for educating managers. In coaching we realize that when a coachee says they 'don't have enough time' what they really mean is 'it's not a priority for me'. And this behaviour stems from a shared assumption that coaching and managing people takes time out from doing the 'real job'. In this sense, people were not a priority. This is the first hint at the type of culture managers were living in and the likely changes needed to create a different set of assumptions.

Creating a coaching culture based on the shared assumption about empowerment therefore has to first tackle where existing assumptions come from through a process of diagnosis and digging deep. When managers embrace the fact that it is their job to get things done through their people and adopt a mindset that delivers this, then everything changes. So, this mindset shift means transforming the organization from a culture where coaching might take place if time allows, to one where coaching effects radical change. The role of managers is to set the context and direction for employees and provide reference points against which they can measure their actions.

So what is a coaching culture?

A coaching culture is one where people are empowered and where coaching happens at every level. And, not only does it happen at every level, but it adds to bottom line performance. It is the recognized development tool that touches every part of the employee lifecycle.

So when we are talking about a coaching culture strategy, in essence we are talking about the vehicle to empowerment. In our experience, companies where there is a vital ingredient missing means the culture is less likely to change. And this missing ingredient is engagement. In all the organizations we studied that were successful in empowering people and creating a coaching culture, their people were also truly engaged, but in those that were struggling this proved to be the determining factor. If the employees were not engaged, then they were never going to truly be empowered – engagement and empowerment go hand in hand. Engagement without empowerment is truly frustrating for them, but empowerment without engagement is impossible.

Current research shows the importance of autonomy, mastery and purpose, and these factors are the foundation blocks of empowerment and so too of engagement. Everything changes when organizations start to embed a coaching culture. It provides tools and strategies that will ensure managers have truly engaged with the philosophy of managing through a coaching style. People are more motivated, retention improves, performance is enhanced, results improve and as an indirect result, direct costs such as training can be reduced.

Later in the book we describe tools that can help you increase engagement and can be used as part of your tactics for realizing your strategy.

PART B: DEVELOPING A VISION FOR THE COACHING CULTURE

Creating a vision might sound like a lofty or complicated activity, but in simple terms a vision is really just a compelling picture and description of what you want it to be like in the future. It's the destination goal for where you want your organization to go. And that future state is the result of developing a plan, taking action, experiencing results and applying the learning.

In the activity below we provide you with some questions to help you create a starting point. Start with where you're at! What do you have right now that is already working and fits with your concept of a coaching culture? How might you get even more of this in the future?

The questions are designed help you to frame your thinking and act as a guide to drawing out your creativity and clarity of thought.

Culture

- What is it like now?
- What can you see, hear and feel?
- For a coaching culture to be in place what needs to change?
- What must be true?
- How would it impact the organization?
- How are people developed currently?
- What do you need to change to achieve high performance?
- What behaviours that are already in place do you want to encourage?

Indicators

- What behaviours do you see and experience?
- What behaviours do you want to change?
- How well do people understand vision and strategy?
- What type of values and beliefs will be important?
- How will you know?
- What behaviour will be different?

- What behaviours will be the same?
- What about senior behaviours?
- How is coaching currently used throughout the employee lifecycle?
- What do you need to do to develop to the next circle?

Resources

- Who will be the champions of the culture?
- Who will be the detractors?
- How will you know that the right objectives are in place?
- What would tell you?
- What will your strategy look, feel and sound like?
- What is important about all of these things?
- What will they give you?
- What will happen if they're not in place?
- What will happen if they are?
- What about capability?
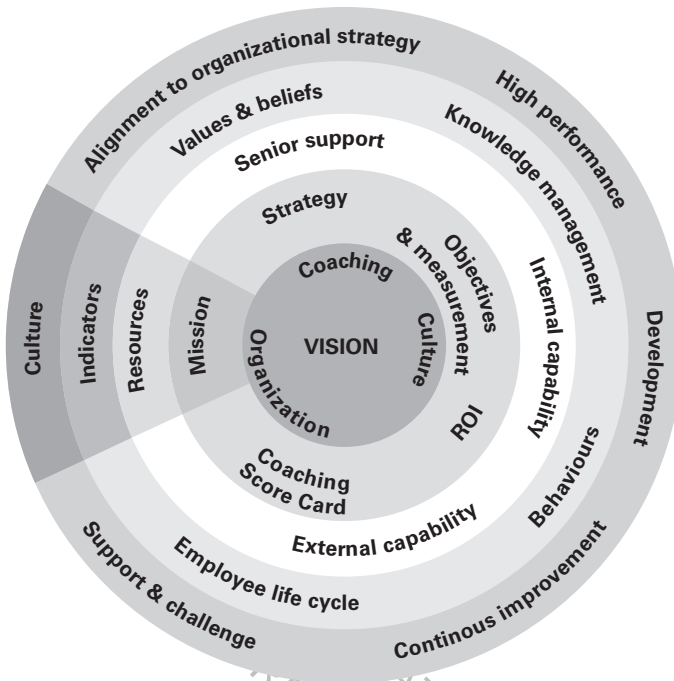- How do you currently use external support?

Mission

- What is your mission?
- What must you do to achieve this?
- What is your purpose?
- How do you currently measure success?
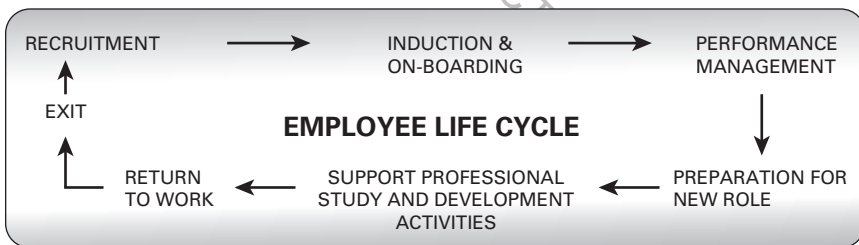- How could you measure success?

In Figure 1.2, the Strategy Wheel, you can see the whole picture of how your strategy comes together to help develop a coaching culture. The contents under each heading will, as mentioned before, be different for each organization. There is, therefore, no right or wrong answer – only the answer that's right for your organization.

In Figure 1.3, Employee Lifecycle, this serves as a useful reminder of all stages of the employee experience.

FIGURE 1.2 Strategy wheel

FIGURE 1.3 Employee life cycle

RECRUITMENT → INDUCTION & ON-BOARDING → PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

EXIT

EMPLOYEE LIFE CYCLE

RETURN TO WORK ← SUPPORT PROFESSIONAL STUDY AND DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES ← PREPARATION FOR NEW ROLE

One way to combine the two tools is to think about how an employee might experience the whole strategy at each stage of their lifecycle with the organization. What shared basic assumptions will be apparent in the way that the culture is experienced?

To help you work through your own creative visioning session here are some sample answers below. Your answers will be different from ours – reflect on your answers and identify any common threads or paradoxes.

Coaching culture – culture is about what experience you have of the organization. What experiences does the organization evoke?

- We are striving for a coaching environment, but our culture is still a bit dictatorial.
- Need to map out positives and find a way to get senior managers to understand.
- Want leaders to feel positive and understand coaching – they don't spend time on it – see it as additional task.
- There is an assumption that managers know how to coach – where is the evidence that they are competent?
- People don't know coaching is available – they see training as the only form of development.

Indicators – how do you know that a coaching culture exists? What behaviours will you see? What values will the organization share?

- Need to turn negative behaviour into positive behaviour – coaching would do that.
- Line managers need to change behaviour – they need to experience coaching.
- Leadership behaviour needs to be improved – they don't demonstrate coaching behaviour.
- HR team need to demonstrate coaching behaviours.
- Executives see coaching as a privilege and get executive coaching, others get remedial coaching.
- Sometimes 'avoidance' behaviour is observed – managers call in external coaches to avoid having to manage performance.

Resources – to create a coaching culture you need supporters and role models. Having a sound strategy that links everything together is also a useful resource on which to build a coaching culture.

- Successful coaches should be rewarded.
- Boundaries need establishing so people know what good coaching looks like.
- Managers need more tools and techniques.
- How prescriptive should we be with models?
- How do we check capability?

- We need to assess the capability of HR first – how do we get to the next level?
- We do have a coaching training programme but it is optional and not well advertised.
- Performance review and coaching should be linked.
- There should be outputs to coaching sessions.
- Coaching should be targeted and meet individual and business needs.
- Confidentiality is essential but how does this affect measurement?
- Everyone is capable – need to work on that assumption.
- Senior level do not know what coaching feels like – they will never buy in until they experience success.
- External coaches are professional and qualified and chosen appropriately when HR is involved, but senior executives sometimes choose their own.

Mission and purpose – mission and purpose is all about what do you want to achieve from a coaching culture, why is it important?

- Currently we are people with great potential that is being wasted, we recognize we need to work on this.
- We have pockets of coaching going on that are not joined up, with the risk of missing opportunities.
- We need a community of external coaches/HR/L&D/line management who coach each other.
- A cohesive approach to thoughts, processes and tools.

Vision – this is what drives you on when the road gets rough. It's the guiding beacon for all your hard work.

- An organization that has an underlying philosophy for developing capability.
- A cohesive unit – like a community where people support each other, unlock potential, are capable, know boundaries, use leadership style positively and are competent.
- We develop successful people who get great business results.
- Senior managers have increased capability and 'walk the talk'.
- We are an example for other organizations.
- We receive awards for coaching success.

- There are structured processes applying to coaching, ie selecting coaches, monitoring coaching and measuring success.

- We offer robust and ongoing development programmes in coaching for managers.

- Coaching moves from being a competence and capability to 'the way we do things round here'.

Creative visioning

A vision is not just a compelling picture of the future – it's the whole cinematic experience: the experience, the sounds, the sights, the conversations, the feeling. It's about creating the 'new world' destination inside your mind. It's a statement of your organization's future reality not written as an objective. It is an experiential statement that describes the main characters, where you will be, how you will be behaving. In short, it's the 'to be...' statement. What do you want to be when you get to where you're going?

Figure 1.4 Vision creation

What is it like at work now?
What do you see as you look around the office?
Who do you notice? What are people doing?
What are you hearing? What are people saying? How are they saying it?
What have been the most important changes since this time last year?
Who has helped you with those changes?

What has happened to your relationships with:
 	
    Your peers:
    Your team:
    Your seniors:
    Your clients:

What are you feeling?
What are you planning to do next?
What have been your key successes?

Below there are some questions you might like to consider to help you to create your own vivid vision. Imagine that you are one year in the future. Take today's date and think of the same day next year. You walk into your office and, as you do so, consider the questions in Figure 1.4.

As you answer these questions, think about how you can turn this into a pictorial representation – you could create a metaphor for your coaching culture – using pictures, words, symbols. Or you could even use physical objects to represent the culture. Create conversations around the metaphor and discover where they lead. This is something Ro uses with her business partner in workshops around change. Crafting a metaphor for change when you're not sure of the outcome means that you gain different perspectives. And it frees your thinking and allows emergent knowledge that leads to potential solutions. Use this metaphor to create a visual representation of your coaching culture to spark conversations and act as a constant reminder of why you are embarking on this tough but rewarding journey.

Summary

Creating a coaching culture starts with understanding how you define culture and then working out what sort of culture you have to begin with. It is a process of data gathering, analysis, diagnosis and solution that leads to action. When you're clear on your starting point you can then start to create a new future. At the forefront of coaching is the notion of empowerment so it's important to know what set of shared basic assumptions you're starting with before you begin.

Creating a coaching culture strategy is about discovering your destination and working out a system to manifest that future destination into reality. Knowing what to look out for means you have the means to establish which practices need to change. Leadership is about taking purposeful action and doing the right things. Gaining momentum for your vision starts with you! There is nothing as attractive as someone who has clarity and certainty in what they say, think and do. It automatically draws people into your world and captures their attention and involvement. Having said that, becoming a born again 'visionary' can turn people off if it is overdone.

So, it is important to remember that before talking to others about a coaching culture, you need absolute clarity on what you want to achieve. Here is a typical vision of an organization that is in the process of implementing a coaching culture.

Coaching is an integral part of the organizational culture and one of the core practices for achieving business strategy and meeting business goals. We are even more successful because the coaching culture meets the needs of the organization, team and individual to enable 'being the best'.

Indicators of success

- All managers take responsibility for the development of their staff and all staff know that they are valued.
- Coaching is based on best practice and is consistent in its standard of delivery.
- Every employee has an individual coaching plan agreed with their manager that is reviewed regularly.
- Employees feel valued as members of the company and there is an environment of continual learning.
- Coaching is measured effectively to ensure value for money is achieved.
- Knowledge and good practice is shared regularly and freely.
- Performance is visibly enhanced.

Empowerment through coaching isn't necessarily achievable for all organizations – particularly if the desire is not there, but any movement towards it will always be possible. Sometimes the existing culture is too entrenched for real change to happen. Think about what type of culture exists already in your organization and imagine what it could be like if a coaching culture took root. Be realistic about what you could achieve and the impact this would have. Knowing where you want to go starts with preparing the way today. Start with the end in mind and acknowledge the current reality.

Reflections, hints and tips

- How do you define culture? Does everyone in your organization have the same understanding?
- What would you need to do to create a common definition of culture that works for your organization?
- What is the culture in your organization?

- What are the practices?

- What shared basic assumptions underlie these practices?

- What would empowerment look, feel and sound like in your organization?

- What could you see would happen in your organization if you were to implement a coaching culture?

- What might you have to give up as an organization?

- What might you gain?

- What stops people from being accountable?