

The business end of the coaching revolution

One of the most common criticisms of Sportscoach UK is that it doesn't know its accruals from its cash flow. However, from April this year Phil Collier has been adding commercial acuity to the coaching mix, prompting Mick Owen to make the trip to Leeds to ask him about the task in hand.

I meet Coachwise's Phil Collier in the rather well-appointed dining room of the Queen's Hotel in Leeds for no other reason than he is booked on the 14.05 for King's Cross and the hotel is within a porter's stagger of the station. His new role at the heart of the sports system means he makes the London to Leeds commute virtually every week but he looks well on it and is clearly thriving on the challenge.

The exact nature of that challenge is the role of director of business development at Coachwise, a new post created two years ago with a job description that talks of maximising the opportunities that arise from the UK Coaching Framework. The exact nature of the opportunity revolves around the resources needed by developing coaches, from workshops and text books through to specialist equipment. As a coach himself – he was until recently part of the England lacrosse national men's team which won the European championships last year – Phil believes there is a need for such support.

Before we got into the detail of his current job, we discussed his career path to date. "Previously I was head of sport and recreation at SkillsActive, where I set up their professional development board and regional development team," he says. "Before that I was head of education and training at Sport England, which gave me a good overview and understanding of the education and training market and included responsibility for the funding of Sportscoach UK."

But which comes first in his mind, 'education and training' or 'market'? "A bit of both is the answer. I'm very conscious of the accusation that Coachwise is only interested in making money but I would say, probably, 'quite rightly'. They are the trading arm of Sportscoach UK and at a very basic level their mission is to generate a surplus to re-invest into coaching. But I am a coach, a volunteer coach and I have worked in the public sector. Nowadays I may be working in a commercial organisation but my mission is still to improve the quality of coaching."

Does this coaching focus create a tension within his business-focused role? He is quick to respond: "No tension. It's a win-win." Phil goes on to explain that he is no double-glazing salesman intent only on selling whether the customer wants his product or not. He argues that his customers, no matter where in the sport system they operate, simply want "better coaches, better qualified, better supported" and that "we are trying to develop resources that can help them do that." It is not about selling, he argues; it is about matching the resource to the need. "We are in the privileged position of being part of the national lead agency for sports coaching and coach development. My job is to keep my ear to the ground, find out what's going on strategically and make sure we put in place what is needed." He is also sanguine about the multitude of competitors in the marketplace: "It's a free market. Anyone who jumps through the appropriate hoops can deliver national standard framework qualifications, for example. Once they are up there on the system, anyone can deliver them and I'm quite prepared to go up against the competition and do a better job."

For a man who started his working life selling televisions, if not door to door then certainly high street to high street, what he calls "the real world" of commercial competition holds no fears but there is the suggestion from some quarters that the same may not hold true throughout the company. He acknowledges that he is aware of the argument and concedes only that "a lot of the people working in sport who have come through a physical education route may be a little less willing to make decisions and take a business-like approach to their work".



Phil Collier: lacrosse leader

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A short review of the history of the National Coaching Foundation – how it grew and then split into Sportscoach UK and Coachwise, the latter starting with two or three staff and growing into a ninety-strong organisation housed in a warehouse in spitting distance of Armley jail – leads Phil to draw a distinction between what are essentially two arms of the same body. “Sportscoach’s role, its mission, is to lead, develop and support the implementation of the UK Coaching Framework,” he explains. “They are the charitable side of the business. They liaise with government, funding agencies, politicians and deal with the strategy side. They work with coaches and coaching experts, do research, look at technical developments, the size of the workforce and so on. Their side of the equation is to have the ideas; my side is to turn their theoretical approach into real practical applications. So my mission in life becomes to encourage them to meet deadlines, to make decisions and to do practical things that will help coaches.”

No conversation about Sportscoach UK in early summer 2009 could not include consideration of the departure of Dr Pat Duffy from the scene. Given the sensitive nature of the subject, it is probably best to say that Phil is as surprised as anyone by what has happened. While the collaborative style of working within the staff team at Sportscoach might tend to exacerbate the impact of such dramatic developments, Phil remains optimistic about the future.

When we talk about the future Phil is sure that Coachwise is fit for purpose and ready to build on the contribution it ‘gives back’ to Sportscoach each year: “Last year the surplus was over £580,000, give or take, and it’s grown steadily over the years.” Asked how he will achieve his objectives, he is equally certain: “As a coach myself I am very aware of what’s going on. I used to work for a governing body so coming in I was aware of their issues. Through my time at Sport England and SkillsActive I knew what county sport partnerships were experiencing and so when I arrived at management team meetings of the whole group I could point out a few things that weren’t quite right. On the back of that I was asked to do a business review [looking at] where we were with sports coaching services. I discovered that we had something like 47 workshop titles but 88% of our business was done on only six of them. We had workshops with no resources. We had workshops with no tutors. Our membership numbers had been at 16,000 but were down at 3,000 and across all areas 66% of our products were in the decline phase of the product life cycle. All the indicators pointed down. Lots of things were good within what we did – the six workshops were obvious examples and our tutor training is excellent – but too many areas had been given too little attention over the previous two or three years.”

Of course, being a coach and part of the Sportscoach UK group, he was never going to dwell on the negatives. “We decided to look on the state of affairs as a positive opportunity to change; and we are changing. We have a new vision, a new organisation and we’re adopting a new approach. The key thing for me is getting the staff involved, getting them to understand the vision and develop ownership of what we’re doing.”

So is that the fundamental challenge internally? “Put it this way: if you’d asked any three members of the Sportscoach organisation back then – a manager, a board member and one of the coalface workers – what it was we offered you would have got three completely different answers. No consistency, no ownership, no understanding of our offer. There were no clear plans and no clear direction so it was no wonder the customers didn’t understand where we were going or what we were doing. But now we have cross-group management teams on projects where print designers from our side, say, and technical experts from their side come together to discuss the theoretical, what we would like to see, and decide on what’s practical – what’s realistic and what’s not. The group can then consider everything, from the best type of paper to use if we want coaches to write on a resource to how best to promote the availability of the new resource to those people who will be interested in using it.”

By now Phil is in the zone, high on enthusiasm and corporate pride: “It’s early days but we now have plans in place in each of three areas: products, which includes workshop delivery and resource development; network membership, which is member communications and coaching edge subscriptions; and the third area is marketing and communications of all of the above. And in there we’ll try to join up with what Sportscoach do such as the UK Summit or governing body forums and build on what they might be doing to market what we have to offer. We hope this will bring added value and more effective working and actually involve the staff in the development process.”

Asked if he can cite any practical examples, Phil goes back to those 47 workshops: “We have fourteen ready to deliver with resources in place, tutors recruited and trained, and we know the pricing structure. And we’re working from there, from a smaller base. There’s a lot of work still to be done but I like to

think that by the 2010 summit we might be able to re-launch the next tranche of workshops having done a soft launch this year.” So these changes are going to be gentle? “Evolution rather than revolution. We need to be able to deliver what we promise, rather than make a song and dance about something coming down the line but not actually in place.”

After a quick diversion into the web developments that now seem de rigour for any business, we get back to the fundamentals. “Everything we’re doing goes back to the framework. Eventually we’ll have resources aimed at children’s coaches, community coaches, talent coaches and high performance coaches; the full breadth of the ‘4x4 model’. We certainly don’t yet have resources to put in all of the boxes in that model and I’m not sure the priority is to have products in all 16 boxes. It’s about where you focus your effort. Is it on community and children’s coaches or elsewhere in the model?” Still on the demands of the framework he talks about coach educators: “Equally important are coach educators, coach developers and their trainers plus the assessors and verifiers and all the other roles we have these days. We have to get that sorted out, as we do another under-supported area, coach managers. If you want to have world-class coaches you have to have world-class people managing them. And, alongside supporting the framework, the second key thing is supporting partners – governing bodies and CSPs primarily – to make sure that what we are developing and offering adds value to what they are doing. We should not be competing with a governing body. We should be ensuring they can be effective at the cutting edge. Take minimum standards as an example. We have to make sure they work for all sports and they are what small clubs actually need. Basic but necessary stuff.”

And by ‘we’ in all this Phil clearly means the whole Sportscoach UK and Coachwise conglomerate? He thinks for a moment: “I think ‘group’. I am all of it. I may sit in Coachwise but I need to bring value to all of it, as we all do – writers, editors, designers, printers, sales staff, everyone. If we are going to deliver what our partners and customers need, we all need to work like that and say, ‘Yes, we can do that.’ And even, ‘How can we help you?’”

As the clock ticks round to train time I ask Phil for his last message to TLR readers and beyond. He gives it some thought. “It’s a start,” he says. “We have a long way to go. We need to really value our tutors and trainers and re-engage with them as they are key to success. Sportscoach wants to create a world-class coaching system. Sport England wants to develop a world-class sports system. I think if we get it right the former will be the jewel in the crown of the latter. We’re already pretty good internationally but now we have a real opportunity to get even better. We just all need to think like coaches, think about where we want to get to and commit to constant improvement. We can’t let ‘excellent’ in the future get in the way of ‘good’ now.”

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