

Are you free for coaching?

Whether it is an indictment of the retail sector or of the public consciousness that any mention of department stores is immediately referenced by John Inman, it is high time the world had a more modern view of shop assistants. Sam Abrey has been working with the John Lewis Partnership on a coaching project that should certainly help.

In the days when the world of Grace Brothers department store was a topical reference the word 'partner' had the very specific meaning of being 'part owner' of a business or enterprise. Nowadays the word has been so badly traduced that it is even used as a verb but in some parts of our culture – the reassuringly traditional world of John Lewis stores, for example – 'partner' means what it used to say. Every employee of the John Lewis Partnership, whose retail outlets are branded Waitrose and John Lewis, is also a partner in the firm and "the profits and benefits created by our success are shared by all our partners". One of the benefits is the opportunity to volunteer in a variety of charitable enterprises, including a unique sports coaching project set up in partnership with – who else? – Sportscoach UK.

Partners in Sport was launched as an exciting way of demonstrating the John Lewis Partnership's support for the 2012 Olympics through encouragement, support and sponsorship of the company's partners who wanted to get involved in sport. The scheme was designed with three elements: Discovering Sport, which is open to all partners and aims to encourage them to get together and take up a sport or activity that promotes a healthy lifestyle; Coaching in Sport, which is a programme of coach education leading to coaching qualifications for those who want to coach sport to others; and Succeeding in Sport, which offers material support and advice to partners or their family members who are serious about competing in sport nationally or internationally in one of the Olympic disciplines.

Developed in conjunction with Sportscoach UK, the partner coaching programme is aimed at helping around 1,000 partners become qualified coaches in a mainstream sport by the summer of 2012. The programme also provides partners with the opportunity to gain generic coaching knowledge in the area of coaching children as well as training in areas associated with minimum standards of deployment, such as child protection and first aid. The programme aims to build a sports coaching culture within the John Lewis Partnership, supporting coaching in the wider community and linking to UK Coaching Certificate qualifications. The hope is that the programme will ensure that partners wishing to get into sports coaching are appropriately supported throughout the process allowing them to acquire lifetime qualifications, the opportunity to give something back to their local community, and help develop skills that can be transferred to the workplace. The initiative will contribute to meeting government targets regarding the number of grassroots coaches in the UK.

Priti Tapariya, a sales assistant at Peter Jones (the only John Lewis branch to retain its original store name), saw the programme as an ideal opportunity to broaden her coaching knowledge and develop the skills that she had gained from previous coaching experiences. Having recently gained a BSc Honours in sport studies, Priti was already coaching a Year 7 and 8 football team at a local high school as well as coaching netball to a range of participants aged 12 to 25 at her local community centre and in a local primary school. Since enrolling in the partner coaching programme, Priti has completed her Level 1 football qualification and pre-Level 1 netball qualification. She admits that she has learned a lot from the programme. "I have learned and enhanced skills for work, such as organisation and time management, because you have to be on time and punctual as a coach and plan your sessions," she said. "There are definitely transferable skills that you improve through coaching, such as communication, teamwork and organising a team."

Further along the coaching continuum Andy Ruler, a principal programmer at the Waitrose head office in Bracknell, received the necessary funding to complete his Level 2 swimming coaching qualification and become head coach at Bourne End swimming club near High Wycombe. He praised the partner coaching programme for the community benefit it has brought: "It has given me the impetus to qualify to a higher level and financially this is massive benefit to my club and my swimmers. I knew nothing about swimming – I could do breaststroke and nothing else when I started coaching – but through going on the courses you learn the skills, you learn how to deliver them and you keep learning all the time by talking to other coaches. You develop your skills as you go along and there is always somebody there to help you. You don't have to be able to do it; you just have to know how it is done yourself." He also recognises the importance to him as a person in and out of work: "I think personally I am quite a different person. When I started working with swimmers I had to be very organised, to be very clear with communication. I had to

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Priti Tapariya: broadening her coaching knowledge

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engage people to take part in what we were doing, feeding back to people... all those things have changed the way I am at work. It is very rewarding to know that my company is supporting me in my life outside of work. I am a partner. It is part of who I am; it is not just a job. We work in a different way in the Partnership and I feel proud to be a partner."

Two other partners counting the benefits of belonging are Charlie Mangion and Nick Welford, who have returned from the Waitrose Foundation villages in South Africa in May 2010 after running a two-week football coaching programme. Charlie, a part-time checkout assistant, and Nick, a delivery driver at John Lewis in Peterborough got involved with the partner coaching programme after seeing an advertisement for the opportunity to coach football in South Africa. Charlie spoke for them both when he said, "I have only really done coaching in and around London and I thought it would be a good opportunity to develop me as a coach, delivering to other countries, seeing how they would respond to my coaching. It was just a great opportunity."

Opportunity and support seem to be the keynotes for a programme which goes far beyond simply providing coaches for play schemes. The partners who have taken up the offer to learn and grow have developed as coaches, as people and as part of a unique workforce in a company that defines the term 'corporate social responsibility.

Sam Abrey is partner coaching programme manager with Sportscoach UK

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Andy Ruler: now head coach at Bourne End swimming club

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