

It's all in the mind

As behavioural experts psychologists are well-qualified to challenge existing leadership/personal development and change management methods. By Peter Crush

Gone are the days when the most likely reason for calling in the psychologists was for their psychometric and recruitment expertise. This remains a major part of their remit but such is the growth of the service that some say it is becoming a serious alternative to traditional mentoring and coaching. (It has even spawned its own professional organisation – the Association of Business Psychologists). According to the British Psychological Society (BPS), the size of the market is approximately £3 billion a year, growing at 4.6% annually, with 13% of businesses using some type of business psychologist. But what do they do and can they really add to the performance of UK companies?

According to Piers Hollier, head of business psychology at consultancy Getfeedback, the business psychologist is reaching a crucial crossroads. He says: "Anyone can set themselves up as a BP, but at the same time, the BPS is increasingly asking occupational psychologists (OCs) to take on the wider remit of business psychology because the latter means a lot more to people."

This is backed up by BPS research into the services BPs now deliver. Pub-

lished in 2006, the study involving HR directors from 36 companies revealed that workplace design, ergonomics and stress management – three of the main areas of expertise provided by OCs – are now the bottom three services provided by BPs. Their top three services are leadership development, management development and change management. Below that are the related areas of personal development, executive coaching/mentoring, developing teams and diversity. "BPs are realising the advice they can give transcends the individual and has an organisational impact," adds Hollier. "Talent management and change programmes all have behaviours at their heart. It is the strong belief of BPs that behaviours can be learned. People's personalities are stable, as is what motivates them, but individuals typically have a range of behaviours, and BPs who work with organisational behaviour objectives can improve employees' individual outlooks."

Binna Kandola, managing director of BP consultancy Pearn Kandola, and former chair of the division of occupational psychology, says business psychologists have a real opportunity



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Piers Hollier, head of business psychology, Getfeedback

Jamil Qureshi mind-shaper

"There's no such thing as positive thinking," proclaims business psychologist Jamil Qureshi (pictured), as he sits sipping a coffee in a central London cafe. He knows this is just the sort of statement that will disarm me. Surely isn't overcoming self-limiting thoughts exactly why leaders need help from people like him?

"No... Well, yes, all our behaviours are the result of how we think," he offers. "I do look at helping people change the way they think. But the difference is this: the top business people I work with can already take excellent decisions; that's what made them successful in the first place. What I'm helping them do is see the 'evidence' of their decisions differently. If, by positive thinking, you tell yourself you're going to have a great day, you're setting yourself up for a fall. There is no reason why you should have a great day. I tell them to be more realistic. Only by doing this, will they give themselves a chance of having a better day."

Qureshi's logic is strangely compelling. The former Worcestershire cricketer and ex-TV psychological entertainer and magician is at the top of his game. Since entering corporate psychology five years ago, he quickly gained a reputation that saw him become the official psychologist touring with last year's winning European Ryder Cup team. He also has a host of big-name sports clients (including golfer Darren Clarke), as well as numerous (but anonymous) business leaders. And while most HR professionals will have heard of 'mind mapping', Qureshi has developed 'mind shaping'.

"It's about creating subconscious changes that give people a different perspective on what they do," he explains proudly. "Because we can only be who we are, trying to be something or someone else is an inhibitor. I remove inhibitors."

With unashamed name-dropping, he illustrates what this means: "Tiger Woods," he says, "I've spent a lot of time talking to him; and, surprisingly, he's just not a positive thinker. He is an open-minded thinker. He says to himself: 'It's possible I can hole this shot', not that 'I must hole it' – and invariably, it will go in."



It's a subtle way of thinking optimistically." According to Qureshi, most leaders, managers or staff are not open-minded. He explains: "So often I hear business people say: 'I knew that would happen...' Open-mindedness works when you are motivated by what you want to achieve rather than by what you want to avoid."

One of his newest clients is Bolton Wanderers Football Club (BWFC). The club is also undeniably a business, which depends entirely on the ability of its team to remain confident – or optimistic at least – of a win/goal until the last kick of a match. Last season BWFC finished in the top half

of the table, but are currently languishing in the bottom three relegation zone.

"I'm working on a one-to-one basis with the players," says Qureshi. "Sammy Lee [Bolton's coach] wants players who score, say, eight goals a season, to think it's possible to score 12. For some this is about confidence, for others it's about relaxing or being more focused."

According to Qureshi, Lee more closely resembles a 'leader' in the business sense of the word than a 'manager' because he is someone whom his team "would follow over the trenches". He says the same such leadership should be seen



Qureshi with two of the Bolton Wanderers team

in corporations and that his techniques apply. "You can improve teams just by improving the outlook of just a few key individuals. When you look at a football team today, most have players who can't even speak English, yet they work because they want to fulfil the ambitions of their leader. 'Players' in the broadest sense of the word will come together for a common purpose but for different reasons, and the realistic thinker will find out what these things are."

to make this area of work their own: "It is our responsibility to communicate simply what we are about to avoid scepticism. With the well-tested science of psychology behind them BPs must re-brand themselves as more than counsellors and assessment officers. We've found that 22% of the variance in employee output at work is entirely down to wellbeing."

Fortunately, says Robert Myatt, managing director at business psychologist consultancy Kaisen, the language of psychology is exactly what is becoming more commonly understood by both HR and particularly by business leaders who are looking for competitive edge (see case studies, right and below). According to the BPS research, the area predicted to see the biggest spend in BPs was leadership development, planned to be increased by more than 12%, followed by change management (up 8.3%) and personal development (up 7.8%). "HR has historically measured 'performance,'" says Myatt. "It is now realising that 'potential' is less easy to gauge. There are swathes of leaders in businesses today who have mostly been picked by reputation, but current performance does not suggest they have it in them to take the next step up."

Kaisen works with the talent committees of 30 of the FTSE 250 firms and has found, through independent studies, that the most successful managers

02 Gold star behaviour

Since 2004 mobile operator O2 has run a skills development academy for its top 450 salespeople. The best-performing sales staff achieve bronze, silver, gold and platinum levels but, since last year, all gold-achieving members (some 42 staff, the top 8% in the company), have been given additional business psychology coaching, organised by the academy's head, Katy Liddell. "We wanted to analyse the behavioural side of our best people, and look at what motivates them," she says. "This is because there is a wide range in this top group – everyone from top managers to account executives. Our message is: 'We know you are great at your job, but what else can we



do to help you succeed, and take on extra roles?" Business psychologists sit down with each gold achiever for more than two hours, putting them through tests and simulations, and asking them about their personal as well as business lives. "The crucial part is that these simulations and behavioural tests are linked to our own business objectives," says Liddell. "The scheme also has a retention element to it, and the benefit of using the expertise is clear," she adds. "We're finding that those gold members who have had psychological profiling and who are reaching the end of their sessions are already outperforming those members who are just starting."

are ones who are more positive and optimistic about people (see psychologist Jamil Qureshi's take on this, p27). This might appear obvious, but Myatt believes it is all part of what he calls the analysing of 'head space' that business psychologists do: "We've worked with more than 10,000 leaders, and have found that the 25% who reach the top within eight years are not those who have been good at managing their reputations, but people who pick up on what is really important rather than what is said to be important. These are psychological traits that are examinable."

BPs must rebrand themselves as more than counsellors

Binna Kandola,
managing director,
Pearn Kandola

Of course psychometric-testing is already a proven method for weeding out the bad from the good, but commentators also believe business psychology is growing because many of today's leaders, so routinely promoted over the years, are now realising they need extra skills they have managed to get by with without.

"Companies may often recognise and promote the eloquent and outgoing but these people may prove to be the wrong leaders," says Richard Alberg, senior vice-president at Kenexa, the recruitment and retention specialist, who designs psychometric profiling tools for clients including Hilton Hotels and the NHS. Alberg believes business psychologists could be doing a remedial role. "Business psychologists can help recognise the problem and put a solution in place," he says.

But as well as psychologists being quasi-coaches/mentors, or outsiders who can point leaders in the right direction, one important area they are now claiming as their territory is actually spotting hidden talent within companies. Is this really possible? Mobile phone operator O2 thinks so, as does mortgage and insurance company Bradford & Bingley (see case studies). Some might think they are simply under the psychologists' spell, but they also have to results to prove it. ■

Bradford & Bingley Spotting high-potential talent



When Bradford & Bingley's new HR director, Ian Anderson, joined in April 2007, one of his first actions was to introduce business psychologists to assess his upper management talent pool. "I'm not really a huge fan of talent pools," says Anderson, formerly executive HR director at Post Office. "People in them tend to think of themselves as princes, all waiting to be kings. However, I needed to assess quickly what our talent was at executive committee level and those reporting to them, to see if they did indeed have the potential they theoretically had." The total number was 35, with Anderson specifically wanting to find out who was capable of

being 'stretched' rather than those who he knew worked hard, but could not take additional pressure. Working with a team of psychologists from Xancam, Anderson assessed managers against three criteria – emotional, strategic and learning agility – and married them to business objectives. "It has not been an easy process," he concedes. "We have had to rethink our view of some people, previously considered high potential. On the brighter side, about 10% of the group had a much better appraisal of their future performance than we would otherwise have thought." The scheme has been so successful that pilot programmes are now under way to bring psychology to employees lower down the organisation. "Business psychology is just another way of getting to grips with strengths and weaknesses," Anderson adds.