

Coaching for Internal Audit – A window on what can be involved

By James C Paterson

One of the things I am fortunate to do in my work is to coach some Chief Audit Executives / Heads of Audit and Audit Managers and Senior Auditors.

I thought it would be useful to share, in anonymous terms, over the next months and years some of the conversations and themes that emerge from these coaching sessions in the hope that others might identify with the points that can arise and find some of the reflections useful. I hope also it will “debunk” some of the myths about coaching and provide a small window into this word and how it can help the work of internal auditors.

Recently I spent time talking to a Senior Auditor who was promoted a few years ago. The longstanding development need that has been identified by their CAE was that they needed to “build self belief” and take more opportunities to show what they could do to more senior managers in the business. However, they were promoted nonetheless since - despite being a more introverted sort of person - they were an excellent auditor from an analytical skills perspective, with good interpersonal and team working skills (albeit on the more reserved, understated, side of the spectrum).

Since being promoted into a Senior Auditor role, I have been acting as their coach. Over more than a year we have discussed a range of topics and in the coaching session before last we spoke about an opportunity they had not taken to present back the results of a syndicate session they had been working on at a business conference. This conversation raised the issue, again, of their self-belief, which they became the focus of our latest conversation.

We started by exploring, in practical terms what this “lack of self belief” meant in practical terms. On reflection the Senior Auditor explained that it meant that if they received positive feedback they would discount it slightly on the basis that it was a bit too positive - I gave the analogy that a “mark” of +7/10 would become a mark of +5/10. The Senior Auditor explained they liked to “moderate” the feedback they got to adjust it to something they could better believe in for themselves, on the basis that some people would “shoot from the hip” with their feedback, but then in other circumstances be less balanced with their negative feedback.

However, I asked the Senior Auditor to think about what they did when they got feedback of -7/10, did that really become -5/10? -(I.e. moderated more positively)? The Senior Auditor thought that - in fact - they had a tendency to take a -7/10 and make it -8/10!

This then led to the Senior Auditor reflecting that, in the past, their HIA had told them that they needed to “lower their standards” (i.e. be less hard on themselves).

We explored where this “hard on themselves” mindset came, from. The Senior Auditor thought it was a long-standing, rather stubborn, part of their personality. It linked a bit to being good as an auditor, easily able to see the less good aspects of a situation and the areas for improvement – more of a glass half empty frame of mind than a glass half full.

One of the external sources of this mindset was, they thought, the culture of the company they worked for that favoured a more showy, extrovert style. The Senior Auditor explained that they had worked to take more opportunities to put themselves forward, but when faced with a respected, confident and outgoing person, they were often inclined to let them take the stage. This came in part from a genuine admiration of people who were strong, confident and positive, something the Senior Auditor felt wasn't really them. (Note that in our earlier coaching conversation, we had reflected that being impressed with the quality of the presentation style of an extrovert did not actually mean that the content of what the extrovert said was as good as what the Senior Auditor might have said!).

Building on this, we discussed what the Senior Auditor thought they brought to a situation, and – after some time to reflect – the Senior Auditor felt they brought the following qualities: a focus on the task in hand, having a positive intent to help, an ability to listen and reflect, bringing patience and thoughtfulness to issues, and they also had a lot of practical knowledge of their company and the sorts of solutions that could work.

I suggested this was a rather impressive set of qualities for someone to have in a work context (perhaps 8-9/10 in terms of qualities), but the Senior Auditor said they felt that these attributes were just “basic” and to be expected. They explained the attributes felt more like 5/10 – and we joked that here was another example of the “discounting mindset” they were bringing to the way they saw things!

The Senior Auditor reiterated that the company culture admired energy, innovation and confidence and therefore their capabilities were not rated so highly by the company. I said there might be some truth to the fact that as an external reality introverts were not so highly admired by the company, but that did not explain where their own discounting of their capabilities came from. I suggested this was also coming from inside of them, not just from the company. Partly this could perhaps be explained by the fact they had worked for the company for a long time and therefore some of this had “rubbed off on them”. However, we noted that, although they were not yet HIA, the company had, in fact, seen that they had Senior Auditor qualities and promoted them over and above some more extroverted characters, so it was not simply a case that extroverts were favoured in all cases by their company.

We went on to reflect on where these beliefs and values (to work hard, focus on the task etc.) came from and whether the Senior Auditor really doubted in

themselves that these were the right things to do. On reflection the Senior Auditor said they knew that their beliefs about what to bring to a work problem were good, and they did recognize that not everyone would come to a work situation with such a mindset (often more concerned to agree a “quick fix”, “defend their turf” and avoid doing too much work themselves).

Reflecting back on all of this, I suggested that there was probably some more work to do to reframe the Senior Auditors belief (reinforced by earlier management feedback) that their development need was to “build their self-confidence”. I felt that this was easily conflated with an impossible development goal which was to “become more extrovert”, which involved turning away from, and discounting, the strengths they had as an introvert. Equally the idea that the Senior Auditor should “lower their standards” was an attack on the high (and even admirable) standards they had and therefore not a goal that they could really take on without reservations.

I therefore suggested that perhaps the Senior Auditor had a lot more confidence about their core values and beliefs concerning what should be brought to the workplace than they were giving themselves credit for. Moreover they had a mindset that admired the qualities of others (e.g. extroversion and imagination) even though they were not particularly strong on these qualities themselves.

I suggested this was a very admirable quality and wondered how many people were really able to value the qualities of others if they did not have them themselves?! I suggested this was why the Senior Auditor was such a good team player, but there was a risk that they were “over privileging” the contributions and capabilities of confident extroverts, compared to their own contribution to the workplace. By the same token, their inner critic did not need to be turned off; it was one of the things that had helped them develop high standards and develop themselves, but, rather, it needed to be moderated slightly when it came to self analysis.

There was a fair amount of silence during the latter parts of our coaching conversation and it is important to say that there were several points where I asked the Senior Auditor: “so where should we take the conversation now”. Thus although I was the one who verbalized some key points, the overall conversation (of just over one and a half hours) was very much a product of our joint endeavours to explore an important issue for the Senior Auditor.

Towards the end of the coaching session the Senior Auditor said that they found the reframing of the “lacking self confidence” mantra to have been an important shift in the way they had framed things and we agreed to talk in again in a couple of months to discuss where the Senior Auditors reflections in the intervening period had taken them.

For the sake of confidentiality I will not be sharing each and every step of the journey I take with this particular Senior Auditor, but I may return to developments in the future. However, I hope that this account has started to



open the window on the world of coaching for auditors. Finally it should be stated that this account of the coaching session has been approved by the Senior Auditor in the spirit of supporting the development of others. For that I am most grateful and hope readers have found this account to be interesting.

If you are interested to learn more about Coaching and how it can help improve Auditor personal effectiveness contact: jcp@RiskAI.co.uk