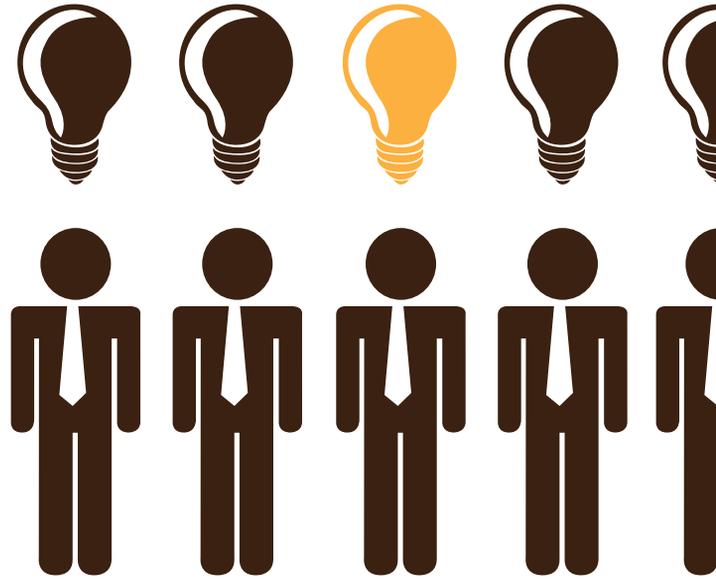


Can They ALL be Coached?



By Joanne L. Smikle

Coaching is an important skill for leaders to develop. It saves time, boosts competence and confidence, while enhancing morale in the work environment. But the question of whether all problem employees can be successfully coached is one that comes up often. There are employees who are so difficult, so recalcitrant that they may be beyond even the most skilled, most well-intentioned coach. So how do you identify these truly bad seeds and decide what to do with them?

Making the distinction

There are three factors that must be considered when determining who can be coached. The first is attitude, the second altitude, the third aptitude. Attitude is the sometimes subtle, sometimes overt demonstration of how the employee feels about the enterprise, the work, the customers and their role. A positive attitude is easy to spot, and so is a negative one. Complaints and whining are unmistakable signs of a less than productive attitude. But there are other attitudes that are not as easy to discern. These are the people who seem to have just a touch of malaise and discontent. They may not be vocal complainers, but there is an undercurrent that is palpable.

Making the determination of whether to continue coaching or throw in the towel requires an honest assessment of the impact the attitude is having on the workplace. Is this person's discontent spreading? Is it poisoning the environment? If it is contained and caught in time it may be possible to save the employee and redirect their energy. If it is spreading, it may be time to cut the ties.

It is also important to discuss the attitude that you are witnessing with the employee. Raising their awareness to how they are perceived may be a sufficient intervention to start them on a path to changed behavior. Of course, more work will be required. Awareness is simply a first step in the process of corrective coaching.

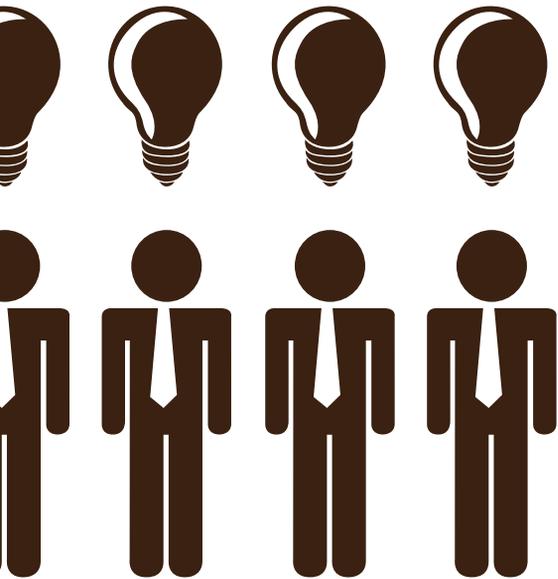
Moving to altitude... Altitude is your assessment of an employee's potential. It asks one question: How far can this person realistically go in our company? If your perception, which we know is a subjective reflection of your experiences with the employee in question, is that the person is severely limited then you may decide not to make the investment in on-going coaching. If your assessment is that the employee has untapped potential, you may want to coach and raise the bar by assigning a mentor to the employee. A mentoring relationship may enable the employee to maximize their potential within the organization.

There is another aspect of altitude that must be considered. An employee may have tremendous potential but be better suited for another environment. An element of your coaching may include encouraging this type of high-potential person to pursue other options. You may have the difficult task of helping an employee discover a better fit for their unique array of talents and skills. While this may fly in the face of conventional wisdom when so many employers are promoting retention; in fact, it makes room for a person who can be retained because they are a better fit for the environment.

Finally, the employee's aptitude must be considered when determining whether to invest in additional coaching. We are not all equally gifted in terms of intellect. While an aptitude deficit may not be problematic in low-skill positions, it can be a significant impediment in most functions. If you know that you are working with an employee whose aptitude is insufficient for the job at hand, it may not be worth it to continue to coach. While training and education are certainly available options, they are not guaranteed to remedy all aptitude issues.

Additional considerations

While attitude, altitude and aptitude are important considerations, they are not the end of the story. Troublesome employees may be troublesome for reasons



you have yet to consider. They may not be sold on changes, approaches or commonplace practices in your workplace. They may be unconvinced of your leadership competence. They may have legitimate reasons for skepticism and distrust.

It is important that you understand the four stages that people go through when they are asked to change their behaviors.¹ They begin with a state of unawareness that is described as pre-contemplation. This is the seemingly blissful stage when they are moving through their normal routines unaware of what is going to impact them. The second stage is contemplation. It is at this stage that new ways of being have

been introduced and employees think about their new awareness to a concept, practice, policy or procedure. While managers wish that employees would skip contemplation and move into immediate acceptance of whatever is new, in the real world this seldom happens. There may be grumbling and complaints during this contemplative period. The grumpy may get grumpier. Some employees may find ways to sabotage, so they can maintain the status quo. The third stage, action, requires behavioral change. Coaching is critical to eliciting the kind of action you desire and helping employees create the skill set to sustain that action. Finally, maintenance is the fourth stage. Consistent coaching is critical to helping employees stay the course.

These four stages raise the important issue of choice. Employees have choices in their behavior. They ultimately decide how they are going to respond to your coaching. They decide how they are going to use their energies and how much they are going to invest in the organization. While they may have the appropriate attitude, altitude and aptitude, if they determine that they are not going to translate those attributes into action, all of the best coaching in the world will be pointless.

Summary

The question of whether all employees can benefit from coaching is not easily answered. There are factors that have to be weighed. They include attitude, altitude and aptitude. Even these factors do not mitigate the role of individual choice. Employees decide whether they will contemplate, act and maintain appropriate standards and behavior. It is up to the leader to create an environment where the best and brightest will want to stay, invest and commit. Coaching is certainly a mechanism that aids in the creation of that environment.

Joanne L. Smikle provides insightful consulting and leadership education to public and private sector organizations across the country. She specializes in leadership development, collaboration and customer satisfaction. Visit www.smiklespeaks.com for articles and resources. She can be reached at joanne@smiklespeaks.com or 301.596.3140.

¹ The four stages are adapted from “Organizational Change and Development,” by Karl E. Weick and Robert E. Quinn, published in *The Annual Review of Psychology*, 1999.

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