

# TEACHING THE ART OF COACHING

J O A N N E L . S M I K L E

**Coaching**, the performance management process that undoubtedly yields sustainable performance improvements, is an essential weapon in every HR practitioner's arsenal. The ability to coach the business units we support, to coach each other and the willingness to be coached—these are all endeavors that we must engage in fully and consistently. This article provides a concise framework for teaching managers how to coach. While the article is geared towards HR, the principles can be used by most any manager in any organization.

Coaching is the deliberate, thoughtful process for tapping potential, guiding performance and increasing productivity. Skillful coaching relies heavily on collaboration. Both parties, the coach and the coached, are responsible for partnering to yield the best results from the process. Success is dependent upon performance goals, specific developmental intentions and clearly defined purposes. In other words, the best coaching is neither vague nor ambiguous. While it may yield many positive unanticipated results, the overall objectives are clear to both parties.

## THE NEED FOR EDUCATION

“Coaching” is a term that is used far too often! It is used regularly without an understanding of what it means and what it can do for the entire organization. Managers cavalierly brag about how they

coach without having a clue about how to coach. Many mistakenly believe that a quick conversation aimed at correction is coaching.

In these situations what is called coaching is actually a seat-of-the-pants interaction between managers and staff. It is neither purposeful nor planned. Because it begins without rhyme or reason it yields frustration. In these instances, the happenstance conversation cannot build compe-

which may have really been a fluke, was coaching. Hence, the need for HR practitioners to teach managers to make “coaching” more than a buzzword. The most successful leaders make coaching a priority.

## COACHING IN CONTEXT

Coaching is a tool that can transform the workplace. Environments that use this performance management strategy are typically more communicative. People feel free to

share their insights without fear of reprisal. They understand the benefits of discussing divergent points of view, seeking clarity and being responsible for their individual growth. This flow of information also helps the entire enterprise take ownership for organizational development. People understand the necessity of analyzing processes, systems and services because they are actively engaged in examining their own approaches and the results they yield.

This approach to human development cannot flourish in every enterprise. Organizations that are extremely bureaucratic or hierarchical lack the flexibility required for coaching. They rely on coercive or autocratic leadership. Because coaching encourages discussions between the coach and the coached, it cannot exist in environments characterized by top-down communication. While these environments may see small pockets of coaching in business units committed

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tence or confidence. In fact, because it occurs in such a wanton manner, the interactions are counterproductive.

Think about it: A manager gives an employee feedback based on limited observations. That feedback is not followed up with specific or long-term developmental objectives. The employee may or may not have the skills to create a personal developmental plan. And yet the manager feels that the one-shot conversation,

to collaboration, this is not the norm.

There is a natural fit for coaching in organizations that are led by more democratic or pacesetter leaders. These leaders understand the need to grow people. They understand the fact that well-rounded, well-developed people are able to provide the insights necessary to deliver peak performance. These leaders model positive collusion in their ongoing conversations with people about their work, their approaches and possible modifications. These conversations are the building blocks for creating an environment where coaching, at all levels, is normative behavior.

We HR practitioners must get comfortable introducing coaching skills to the business units we support. We have to teach managers, whatever their functional unit, how to coach. It doesn't matter the size of the staff, the focus of the strategy or the level of knowledge. We are still responsible for teaching managers the when, where, why and how of coaching. The following paragraphs detail an approach to teaching those skills.

### TEACHING THE COACH

There are as many models of coaching as there are children at Disneyland. Rather than covering a particular model, we will instead address a process for teaching business unit leaders how to coach. Additionally, this process should be used to teach the competencies within the HR Department. Whether you are an OD manager, compensation expert, trainer or generalist, you need to know how to coach.

Understand this: You cannot masterfully teach that which you have not mastered. Before deciding to teach others, be sure that you have developed the competencies yourself. Be certain that you are in the habit of coaching and also engaged in a relationship where you are the person being coached. (The best coaches have

themselves been coached.) Constantly work to evaluate your own coaching efforts. Are you getting the desired results? How can those results be measured? Have you discovered transferable best practices through coaching? These are key questions that you must ask before beginning the teaching process.

Teaching leaders to coach is a three-step process:

1. **Define**
2. **Assess**
3. **Formulate**

The process begins with providing a clear definition of coaching, the role of the coach and the role of the person being coached. Begin by making a clear distinction between coaching and counseling. The former is a willing, participatory process whereby performance is improved. The latter is a management-led process used to correct unacceptable behavior. Counseling only occurs when coaching has failed or a behavior is so egregious that it must be addressed in a very formal manner.

Once coaching is defined, it is time to clarify roles and responsibilities. The person being coached is responsible for outlining developmental needs and interests. Both parties are responsible for building a relationship characterized by candid communication, behavioral observations and ongoing feedback. The coach is charged with sharing observations in ways that help the other person analyze behavior and appreciate its impact. Additionally, the coach is called upon to help the other person define or refine goals relative to the work. It is important that the coach help the person see the link between contributions and work in the larger organization. Receptiveness is an obvious requirement for anyone being coached. This means receptiveness to feedback, receptiveness to reflection and receptiveness to change.

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Moving beyond the definition, the learning continues with an assessment. The assessment will be twofold. First, assess operations, strategy and goals of the business unit. This helps both the coach and the coached have a real sense of what is driving the business and why and how those drivers impact the larger organization. This assessment helps put coaching in a larger context, and reduces the tendency to become myopic. A greater understanding of the business helps ground the coaching in practical reality. Additionally, assess the efficacy of the business unit in which coaching is sought.

Second, conduct a self assessment. This assessment measures individual styles, approaches and abilities. It can be as informal as having a few questions written down ahead of time and having a conversation about those questions. It can be as

formal as using any number of accepted instruments to provide data on styles, preferences and approaches. Either way, it is an opportunity to begin the coaching process with data on both of the participants. This data can be useful in understanding the dynamics of interactions. It helps in building familiarity and comfort.

The teaching process then moves to helping potential coaches learn how to partner with intended coached employees to formulate a strategy for the coaching relationship. Both parties will need to be honest about what they can give to the relationship, the frequency of contact that works for them, and the intended outcomes. Many new coaches ignore the necessity of crafting a strategy. When this happens they spend a lot of time wandering in the woods with no direction, compass or map. This is a waste of time and

energy. Teach your potential coaches to take the time to work through this step. This will help their relationships become sustainable. A sustainable relationship is both focused and aligned with larger organizational strategies.

### CONCLUSION

“Coaching” is not as easy as throwing around the buzzword here and there. It requires more than the occasional conversation aimed at performance improvement. In fact, coaching is a leadership skill that must be taught. Who better to teach those skills than HR practitioners?

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