

A man in a white dress shirt and dark tie is climbing a thick rope. He is holding the rope with both hands and has a laptop computer balanced on his lap. The background is a plain white wall with a blue header at the top.

The Role

While sports metaphors are often used when describing coaching relationships within corporate environments, those metaphors are seldom applicable. For instance, a manager trying to lead his team through a difficult systems conversion was frequently heard exhorting the trite “no pain, no gain” axiom in an effort to get them to ignore the difficulties the new processes were creating. He expected the team to persevere without comment or complaint. And he considered himself quite the coach.

by Joanne L. Smikle

of the Coach

If this manager had stopped for a moment and questioned his approach he would have been better able to elicit the positive performance that he sought. He would have discovered that there was plenty of pain and very little gain. The system conversion was poorly executed; clients were both complaining and defecting. The conversion was also costing far more man hours than anticipated. The staff was working long hours, feeling demoralized, and seeing little gain for all their pain. Just as customers were defecting, so was the staff.

Coaching is a partnership, not a contact sport. Both the coach and the partner are invested in personal performance improvement that benefits both career and corporation. Rather than relying on rhetoric, whether drawn from the world of athletics or that of high hype motivation, it is essential that managers who wish to coach re-evaluate their roles and responsibilities. Let's leave the sports metaphors to Phil Jackson and Don Shula and focus on the very vital function that coaches provide in the business milieu. This article highlights the appropriate roles that coaches play in performance management and performance improvement.

The Coach's Roles

The coach has three primary roles: *Supporter*, *Confidant*, and *Critic*. Each role is important in helping both individuals and groups reach their maximum levels of performance. Each role, when well-executed, provides both the coach and their partner in the relationship with developmental opportunities. The role that the coach assumes will vary at different points in the coaching relationship. As the partner's needs change, so too will the role that the coach plays. It is also quite possible, in fact probable, that as the partner's needs change their coach will too. This is neither an indictment on the coach or the partner. Growth necessitates change.

Before fulfilling the role of *Supporter*, *Confidant*, or *Critic*, the relational foundation must be laid. That foundation happens through building a human connection. Whether the coach and partner connect over the work or over a shared interest, they must first make that connection. This connection is required if the partners are to get to the point of building comfortable conversation. It is this connection that builds a climate from which trust can emerge. It is unwise for a coach to jump into a new relationship focusing first on performance or process. The initial focus must always be on the person. Beginning with the *Supporter*, this function serves the purpose of

inspiring confidence. A coach seeking to establish a solid relationship must present themselves as an ally who is committed to helping the partner fulfill his or her promise. The coach must make it known very early on that they are invested in the partner's success and overall well-being. This is evident when coaches have more than cursory familiarity with the work that occupies their partner's time. A coach should know about major projects and other important activities that involve the partner. One cannot support the unknown.

As an ardent *Supporter* the coach helps the partner process actions, reactions, and outcomes with an eye on identifying behaviors that can be replicated to produce positive results. When the coach encourages reflection he is helping the partner stay on a track that yields laudable results. Reflection also enables coaches to guide their partners in making mid-course corrections. A component of support is being there to help the partner in their failures, as well as in their successes. Failures are natural on any developmental journey. Coaches must acknowledge and encourage their partners to move on with the benefits of the learning that came from the failure. Honest support acknowledges the good and the bad with an emphasis on helping the partner learn and grow from processing all of their experiences.

Fulfilling this role will require the coach to consciously boost the partner's confidence by helping them identify and play to their strengths. Formal assessments like Myers Briggs and the DISC Inventory are excellent starting points for helping the coaching partner work from fact-based data when identifying their predispositions and positive attributes. Consider using a formalized assessment as part of the process for helping your coaching partner develop.

The *Confidant* role requires listening without judgment and encouragement. It is this role that cements trust between the two parties. The *Confidant* establishes personal trust by being fair and respectful when providing feedback. Trust is enhanced when the coaching confidant is wise enough to simply be a silent listener allowing the partner to speak candidly.

A confidant, as the word implies, keeps information confidential. Confidants protect secrets revealed, shun gossip, and are among the most valuable cohorts in any organization. A wise confidant understands that the contents of even the most casual conversations should be protected lest it be misconstrued to the detriment of the partner. They understand that small slips of the tongue can have large negative impacts. They also understand the importance of their role as a trusted sounding board and honor that important responsibility.

Because the coach has proven himself as an ally, the partner is willing to continue to take risks by revealing more about themselves, their lives, and their developmental problems. This deeper revelation happens because the trust is cemented. It is evidenced by both parties' willingness to tackle awkward, uncomfortable conversations. It is further evidenced by their willingness to work through their disagreements. Yes, disagreements do occur in coaching relationships.

The *Critic's* role is the one that requires the highest degree of discernment. It is in this role that the coach can injure or inspire. The feedback provided by a coach should certainly be frank. And that frankness must be tempered with a heavy dose of human kindness, though not so much as to dilute the message. This is a difficult balancing act for which we are not all well-suited. It is very difficult to confront inappropriate behaviors, to highlight deficiencies, and to provide clear, corrective advice. Yet those difficult conversations are inherent components of coaching.

The *Critic* has the tough job of determining what is getting in the way of the partner's progress. Some of those determinations will be made through conversation and the rest through observation. Many of those determinations will have already been made by the partner; self-aware people can identify their own stumbling blocks. In either case, the *Critic* is charged with providing the constructive criticism required to help the partner grow.

It is incumbent upon the *Critic* to be certain that their personal biases do not get in the way of providing sound feedback. For instance, if the coach has disdain for the politics that govern organizational life they may need to be very careful when providing feedback on open politicking conducted by the partner. The coach's disdain may influence him to advise the partner to avoid organizational politics. This is inappropriate and reflects a bias which the coach may or may not acknowledge. Before providing feedback a coach must first clean their lenses of interpretation so that their comments are as unbiased and constructive as possible.

Wrap

It is tempting to try to apply any number of metaphors to complex coaching relationships. Opt, instead, to give serious consideration to the role that coaches play. Consider the benefits, for both the coach and their partner, of refining the competencies required to handle the responsibilities of each role. The three roles described herein are among the most important. Analyze your ability to function in each. Work on building your competence so that you are both ready and able to coach with confidence.



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