

HOW COACHING CAN ENHANCE YOUR BRAND AS A MANAGER

Managers who coach their employees become known as good managers to work for, developers of talent, and achievers of business results. They also become better leaders in the process. The average manager, however, doesn't coach, believing it would take too much time or be a waste of effort. Such barriers, however, are more psychological than real, and represent an expression of the status quo. The fact is that coaching managers behave differently, and that contributes to their brand. The bottom line: Since most managers don't coach, those who do actively help their employees learn and grow have a competitive advantage, one that can enhance their careers. © 2002 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

James M. Hunt and Joseph Weintraub

You know who they are. The executives or managers down the hall or across the parking lot that everybody seems to love to work for. Somehow their people always end up getting the plum assignments. And the CEO loves them because they always seem to have the best people working for them, people who end up going places in the company.

Secretly, you feel jealous. Every so often you'll overhear one of your own employees whispering to a friend, "I'd give my right arm to be working for them."

If one of your people does leave your group to go work for one of "them," you feel angry. After all, you're a nice person. You give your people good assignments and then leave them alone to do their work. Why aren't you more popular? More im-

portant, why don't you achieve breakthrough business results?

The answers to these questions may lie not in what you are doing, but in what you are *not* doing.

Managers who coach, who actively help their employees learn and grow, are seen by their employees and others as leaders who make significant contributions. They are superior business managers who coach not just to be altruistic but to generate business results. They often have lower than expected turnover in their ranks, except when their employees leave to step up to more significant roles along their career paths. Other employees want to work for coaching managers because they believe, rightly, that working for a coaching manager will ultimately enhance their careers.

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If you are not a coaching manager, you have plenty of company. According to *The Leadership Machine* by Michael M. Lombardo and Robert W. Eichinger, employees rank their managers "dead last" in their effectiveness at coaching or in the time they spend coaching in comparison with other leadership activities. Managers are not, for the most part, good at or even active at coaching their employees. One manager, now an information technology director at a major consulting firm, said she was surprised to discover that some managers coached. She had always thought that trying to help employees learn might be a good idea, but she had never seen anyone do it and, as a result, had no idea how to coach. She has since become a coaching manager.

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Most managers practice the sink-or-swim philosophy of people development: Give them a good assignment and, if they survive, promote them. This is what is commonly thought of as learning from experience. But without coaching to help people make sense of their experiences, they can learn the wrong lessons or, worse, fail unnecessarily. Employees know this and grumble, when they can, to managers who can help them succeed and learn. So, why don't more managers coach?

THE BARRIERS TO COACHING

Lack of time is typically the number-one reason given to explain why managers don't coach. Some reward structures also discourage coaching. After all, if coaching is seen as overhead, time spent coaching seems wasteful. A more interesting and more telling rationale for not coaching offered by some managers is the belief that people don't want to be coached. This perspective holds that good employees know what they are doing and, with rare exceptions, don't want their managers butting into their careers.

But these rationales don't stand up to scrutiny. Once people get the hang of coaching, it doesn't have to take a great deal of time. It can take place anywhere: over coffee, at the airport, walking down the hall after a meeting. Managers and employees are so used to life without coaching that they don't have a clear sense of how to integrate it into their routines. Employees appear to not want coaching because they are used to not having it. Research conducted by the Gallup Organization indicates that employees at all levels want their managers to help them develop. Blaming lack of time for the dearth of coaching provided to employees is a poor excuse.

Many organizations simply do not value employee development, or they confuse employee development with classroom education. Nonetheless, many coaching managers press on with their efforts. After all, coaching is one initiative that managers don't need permission to execute.

The lack of a coaching-conducive environment may stem from the kind of comfortable leadership practiced by many managers, leadership that has as its goal maintaining control and extracting compliance from employees. Even some managers who believe that they are coaching managers and who give a lot of feedback can fall into this trap. Coaching is actually a manifestation of a different kind of leadership style, one that meaningfully encourages shared responsibility. Coaching managers know that they can't do it all. Their only recourse, then, is to create conditions under which people will be motivated to learn and grow so that they will demonstrate superior performance and gain greater satisfaction through their work. Most managers don't know what coaching actually means.

THE TRUE MEANING OF COACHING

The purpose of coaching is to encourage learning, not necessarily to encourage compliance or imitation.

Let's say Mary is a manager who is trying to help John, one of her employees. John is a project leader at a customer site, handling a major installation of information technology. John has been having trouble keeping some of his team members focused. They aren't hitting their mile-

stones on time. John is a good project leader and aspires to do even more. This is a good coaching opportunity. So what are Mary's options for helping John?

She can take the sink-or-swim approach and do nothing, assuming that John will solve the problem on his own. John will then be either rewarded or punished at the end of the project, according to his performance. *How* he got the job done or didn't get it done and *what* he learned from his experience are of no concern to the company.

If Mary feels that John's own leadership style is too soft, she might insist that he get tough with his team members. For example, she might suggest that he tell them to work around the clock until they achieve their milestones.

What is likely to be the outcome of such an intervention? If John's management style is more supportive than directive, he's likely to find his manager's advice difficult to put into practice. John may, in fact, resist such advice for a variety of reasons. However, let's say that John does give it a try, and gets tough with his team members. What has John learned?

Assuming the tough approach worked, John's first lesson is that his boss has the right answers. After all, John didn't figure this out, his boss did. He might also have learned that he doesn't like taking the tough approach, even if it is effective, because it's "just not me." If the tough approach didn't work, John will have learned that his boss gives bad advice. (This, by the way, is one reason why some managers don't like to give advice.)

Most important, John hasn't learned anything about diagnosing the relationship between his own management style and how his team functions. If John is going to grow as a team leader, he needs to understand a lot more than just "sometimes you have to be tough." He'll need to have a variety of tools at his disposal for a variety of situations, and he'll have to know which tool to pick and when.

Mary's other option in helping John is to encourage him to spend some time thinking out loud about the challenge. She might ask him to describe the problem in more detail, including what John has done to date, to help them both get a picture of what is working, what is not working, and why. In doing so, they might discover that John hasn't really been clear with his team about how much

time they should be spending on new customer issues that emerge during on-site installations. Mary then might ask, "Why not?"

Let's say that John said he wasn't always clear about that himself, given how much rework new customer issues can require. "You want to listen to the customer, but that can certainly throw you off schedule," he explains.

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John and his manager then have two issues to discuss: (1) the appropriate strategy for managing customer issues that surface during the installation, and (2) how best to communicate that strategy. Note that this process may have uncovered a root cause of John's inability to keep his team on schedule. If John gets a chance to think the problem through, he might realize that he needs to be more assertive in communicating his agenda to the team. If Mary knows John, and knows that at times he is not sufficiently assertive, she might offer feedback to the effect that "I know that can be a problem for you."

His manager's feedback at this point is directed at supporting John's own self-assessment of the situation. It is not a prescription. John's manager wants John to own the problem and the solution *and* to learn to think it through for himself. So she says to John, "What do you think you ought to do?" If John believes he's got to be tougher, he's much more likely to accept this harsh reality, to push himself beyond his comfort zone, because he fully concurs with the diagnosis.

What has John learned from this approach? He has learned a step-by-step method for thinking through how he leads a team and how he communicates his agenda to the team. He's learned something about how teams work, about how he works, and about business tactics. He hasn't learned that his boss has all the answers. He has learned that his boss asks tough questions (though he probably knew that already). He has also learned that his boss is trying to help him develop on the job (though he probably knew that already as well).

Too often, managers associate coaching with managing employees' performance problems. You "coach" somebody as a way to keep him or her from derailing. Unfortunately, when people are in trouble in their jobs, they're likely to be very defensive and have a difficult time opening up with their manager. The coaching option just described can take place only if employees and their managers have an open and trusting relationship. John had to be willing to think through what he had done, what had worked, and what hadn't worked in front of his boss. If John believed that Mary would attack him for making mistakes, punish him in the performance appraisal for talking openly about actions that don't go well, or not listen as he reviewed the problem, John probably would have kept the discussion at a very superficial level. As John's manager, Mary had to believe that John could come to a right answer and that his performance would improve through the learning process.

Feedback aimed solely at eliciting compliance is not coaching.

When employees have performance problems, they are targets for a fair amount of criticism, even if humanely delivered. In many cases, the best that managers can hope for is compliance: Here is what you have to do to succeed, here is how you are doing (feedback), now close the gap. Feedback aimed solely at eliciting compliance is not coaching. Compliance doesn't necessarily help people learn, improve their capabilities to utilize knowledge, and/or execute actions more effectively now or in the future.

ON COACHING AND LEARNING

In a chapter on career development published in *Organizational Psychology* (Prentice-Hall, 1984), Donald Wolfe and David Kolb explain how people learn from experience. Learning involves more than trial and error. Experiential learning begins with taking action. However, the learner then has to make sense of the results of that action. Making sense of the results requires that the learner

reflect on what happened and why. When necessary, these reflections are supported by other forms of data, such as feedback from the manager. This is typically the step that managers leave out when they resort to sink-or-swim development or just provide feedback. They don't give employees an opportunity to make sense of what has happened.

Making sense of what happened and why leads to the testing of that hypothesis through further action. Once employees have learned something from what happened last time, they will try to do things a bit differently next time. That gives them more experience on which to reflect, and the learning cycle is repeated.

Learning doesn't require that the manager "teach." It requires that the manager make learning possible by encouraging employees to work through the learning process and, with a little support, develop their own answers. If John is to be a successful project manager, or a program manager or group manager as he moves up the corporate ladder, he needs to become an expert in team leadership. That doesn't mean he has to become a psychologist. It means he has to use his own experience as his teacher, and look for the lessons each experience can offer. The coaching manager's job is to help that process along.

WHAT DO COACHING MANAGERS DO?

Coaching managers exist at all levels in the organization and can be found in every function—from engineering to manufacturing, from marketing to human resources. These are some of their most important characteristics and responsibilities:

They have a coaching mindset. They get a clear sense of what can be gained by leading a group that is engaged in learning about how to work more effectively. They believe that they will be more successful by building a better organization, not by only focusing on results. (Although these managers do get results, they also focus on *how* results are achieved.)

Once they are clear about the need to help their people keep learning, they then hit the real truth: People can't be forced to learn. People learn what they want or need to learn. One would hope that managers have hired the right people, people who want to learn what the manager wants them to

learn. But this isn't always the case. You can't coach everyone. Many coaching managers say that a key aspect of their work is making sure that the right people are in the right jobs. They are open to employees telling them that they are in the wrong role, the wrong group, or even the wrong company. They usually try to help those individuals find roles to which they are well suited. Coaching managers focus their efforts on those who do want to learn what will help them and their group.

They create a coaching-friendly context. If people are punished for making honest mistakes or are discouraged from being open with their questions and concerns, coaching won't mean much. Sometimes it takes a great deal of work not to punish, even subtly, an employee who does something wrong. As one manager noted, "You can't say with one breath, 'What did you learn from that?' and in the next breath chew the employee out." If you want to encourage learning, you have to cope with the frustration you may feel knowing that you could have done it better, faster, or cheaper yourself. If you are coaching, you need to try and stay on the sidelines.

Coaching, however, is only one tool. Even coaching managers sometimes have to take charge of a situation to prevent a disaster. On balance, however, they try not to do that. They put as much responsibility on their employees as possible, and then try to help them be successful.

Many coaching managers are very open with their employees. They are clear about the fact that they are going to coach. They orient new employees to their management style. They also encourage their employees to coach them.

They ask good questions, and then they listen. Coaching managers don't jump in with feedback—at least not right away. They use good questions to encourage others to reflect on the situation and assess themselves. One manager described how "you learn the most amazing things when you get them to think about how they are doing. I have people who come up with far better ideas about what they are doing right or wrong than I could, and I consider myself a pretty observant manager."

Listening does require that the coaching manager have a certain tolerance for silence. If you ask someone a tough question, you have to

give that person time to think and respond. You also have to respect the answer. Listening conveys that respect.

Some managers worry about how to design good coaching questions, but they can actually be quite simple. Basic formulations are best:

- What were you trying to do?
- What were you hoping to accomplish?
- What did you actually accomplish?
- How do you understand the gaps?
- What do you need to keep doing, start doing, or stop doing next time?

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Of course, the questions need to be modified to fit the situation, but routine questions create a disciplined approach to reflection and learning. You don't have to be super-creative to coach.

They provide feedback that helps. Feedback should be timely and clear. Coaching feedback also should be directed at what the learner is working on. It should be offered to help, not to dictate a solution. The assumption here is that the employee in question wants thoughtful help. Good and superior employees are most likely to find even tough feedback helpful.

They stick with it. Learning is serious business. When employees say they want to become better at something, such as managing a customer interface, and if their mastery of that skill or task will help the group, the coaching manager will look for coaching moments to help further their development. The coaching manager knows what employees are working on. This doesn't necessarily mean that they have each employee prepare a written development plan. Some coaching managers do; others don't. But both employees and the coaching manager should always know what the employees are working on.

These are some of the things that coaching managers strive to do while they are pushing for

business results. How would you like to work for such a manager, regardless of your current position? Some CEOs might recognize the behavior described here as that of a high-performing board member. Some first-time managers who were lucky enough to have had a coaching manager early in their careers will recognize these characteristics in the behavior of the person who got them off to a good start. The principles appear to be the same, regardless of level in the organization.

ENHANCING YOUR "BRAND" AS A MANAGER

Your brand represents how others know you. Because coaching managers are relatively rare, they become well-known in their social worlds. If you get a reputation as a coaching manager and people want to work for you, what will be the impact?

Consider what it would be like to be able to pick the members of your team from a large pool of employees who are motivated to learn and succeed. Consider the potential impact of such highly motivated individuals on your business processes and results. Consider whether being known as a developer of talent could help you build influence with other managers. Most managers would love to have such a reputation. Because coaching is relatively rare, coaching managers appear to have a competitive advantage, at least for now. There is more, however.

Many coaching managers say that it was only by developing a sense of the role of coach that they were able to let go and stay involved at the same time. Business writers and thought leaders from Douglas MacGregor to Jack Welch have been encouraging managers to let go and empower their employees, to push responsibility down where it belongs. Unfortunately, such admonitions also sometimes include the phrase "and get out of the way." Coaching managers instinctively and rightly

know that that doesn't work. A manager cannot abdicate responsibility. So what should be done?

A coaching mindset helps you stay in touch with what is happening while helping your employees achieve great things for themselves and the organization. Asking the right questions encourages employees to think and take ownership, yet also gives you, as a manager, the opportunity to let employees know what you're thinking. Asking the right questions also helps you learn about what is going wrong—and right—throughout the organization.

One coaching manager, someone who has created a great deal of trust in his organization, sends an e-mail to all project participants at the end of each engagement. The e-mail says, "Tell us three things that went well on the project, three things that didn't go well, and three things that you have learned from the last project." E-mails come in from participants all over the world, and he distills the information and sends it back out to everyone else. He and his team then hold coaching discussions, as needed, on good learning opportunities and important problems. This coaching manager is known as a worldwide resource in his area, because his knowledge of customers and business processes is so deep.

Will coaching enhance your brand in every firm? Although there are some companies that value the kind of coaching described here, senior management of other firms may not care whether you as a manager are effective at developing talent. However, great coaching managers can be found in even the most hostile developmental environments. The word still gets out. Employees still want to work for them, and they still get good business results. And of course, good business results will help you build your brand as a manager in even the most difficult settings. ■

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Buckingham, M., & Coffman, C. (1999). *First break all the rules*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
Lombardo, M.M., & Eichinger, R.W. (2001). *The leadership machine*. Minneapolis, MN: Lominger Limited.