



Coaching for Success

Coaching plays a vital role in building a strong organization. Your colleagues will feel more confident in the work they do, and you, as their coach, will further develop your teaching skills.

The definition of the word “coach,” when used to identify an instructor or trainer, originates from the mid-1800s when people would hire tutors to teach their children while they drove in stagecoaches on long trips through the countryside. The children would be *coached* in their studies as they rode in their stagecoach.

According to *Webster’s New Dictionary*, coaching is the act of “instructing and training, as in athletes, actors, etc.,” which is the most traditional definition. For me, it brings to mind my high school track and field coach or my crew coach at Villanova University. I’m sure you have similar memories. The same principles apply to the business world and organizations like IMA® (Institute of Management Accountants).

Coaching, especially from the perspective of career development and enhanced performance, is an active process whereby your goal is to move people from where they are to where they want or need to be. Through coaching, you can help your teammates increase

their competence and improve their performance.

Of course, coaching can be used for the big things, such as supporting a member of your team in defining his or her career aspirations, creating an individual development plan to acquire the skills and experiences he or she needs to progress, and then giving him or her the opportunities along the way.

Just as important, coaching can also be used for the little things. For example, I was in a meeting recently that had an important objective and clear agenda. Unfortunately, a “strong personality” dominated the discussion and took it on tangents. Considering we were in the middle of a quarterly closing and knowing I had invested a bit of time in preparing my part of the agenda, I felt a bit anxious. The Chair of the meeting, however, felt powerless to rein in the discussion because of the senior position of the “strong personality.” I spoke with the Chair after the meeting, and together we came up with techniques she could leverage in the future, such as stating the objective and agenda at the start, providing time checks throughout, and maintain-

ing a summary of issues for off-line follow-up. And knowing the person with the “strong personality,” I know his respect for the Chair will grow when she flexes her leadership muscles during the next session.

The Goals of Coaching

Effective coaching increases both the competence and the confidence of the person being coached. With more competence and confidence, your protégé will raise his or her performance level and boost productivity, potentially driving increased productivity across the entire team. Just think: If the Chair had managed that meeting more tightly, 10 of us wouldn’t have needed to meet for a second time to cover the same agenda.

In addition to increasing the competence of employees in their current roles, coaching also enables you to encourage others to take on even more responsibility. A lot of people I work with, whether they’re cross-functional colleagues or members of the finance team, like to be challenged. Coaching allows that to happen. For example, a member of our inventory control team recently leveraged her data analysis skills to support a zero-loss

analysis cost-savings initiative. She was a key contributor to the team, thoroughly enjoyed the experience, and, with coaching, is now on the path to becoming a Six Sigma Green Belt and leading her own initiatives in the future.

Coaching also allows you to open new possibilities for others, often leading to greater personal success and promotion for the employee being coached. Who knows? Maybe the inventory control associate will ultimately become our continuous improvement manager, providing oversight to a whole team of Green and Black Belts and driving significant savings to our operations.

Finally, coaching enables you to handle breakdowns more effectively or, in other words, address the “challenging player” on your team. So, while coaching might well be applied to developing a good performer into an even better one, it can also be used to correct poor performance.

As any good accounting or finance professional knows, it’s all about the return on investment (ROI)—in this case the coaching ROI (read Max Landsberg’s *The Tao of Coaching*). There are many good reasons to invest your time in coaching others, reasons that run on a spectrum from the “more selfish” to the “less selfish.” Effectively coaching members of your team will give you more time for yourself, whether your goal is to go home earlier or do better work. You’ll also develop better interpersonal skills, sharpen your technical skills by teaching others, and have more time for fun. Coaching will allow you to create a stronger organization and, when successful,

give the members of your team more time to produce better work or go home earlier as well. The coaching ROI that’s most important to you, however, will depend on the specific coaching opportunity being addressed.

Essential Coaching Skills

To be an effective coach requires several essential skills. The first is the ability to build relationships and trust. The only way to get the credibility to establish and maintain a mutual commitment in a relationship is to anchor it with trust. Effective coaching starts with mutual trust, especially when it involves deeper issues such as taking a new position.

Another crucial coaching skill is the ability to listen. By truly listening, you can gain insight into the fundamental issues at hand and better appreciate all aspects of the person and situation. Listen to the concerns, commitments, mood, and beliefs of the person being coached. Listen to what he or she believes is and isn’t possible, the particulars of the situation, and for what he or she isn’t saying.

To further commitment, build trust, and resolve breakdowns, you also need to ask questions and generate dialogue. By generating discussion, you’ll help your protégé see the opportunities and possibilities, identify and resolve any barriers, and gain his or her commitment to action.

Effective coaching also requires the ability to assess and provide feedback. Assessments should be based on observation and judged against objective standards. Whether the coaching session is a formal discussion or an informal

coaching moment, customize it based on what has worked in the past and on the individual’s skill level. For example, my expectations of—and feedback to—a summer finance intern for an assignment requiring significant analysis will be different than my coaching of a seasoned professional completing a similar assignment. Specifically, I would walk through the assignment with an intern, whereas I would give a seasoned professional instruction and let him or her complete the assignment alone.

Stimulate Ordinary to Achieve Extraordinary

My favorite aspect of being a coach is stimulating the ordinary to achieve the extraordinary. To me, this means realizing everyone around you has potential and that, as an effective coach, it’s your challenge to tap this potential. A few years ago, I had the privilege of helping lead an SAP Readiness and Implementation project team. We had seen SAP being rolled out at our sister plants and knew it would be challenging and painful. But by pulling together, empowering a solid cross-functional team, and then coaching them along the way, we enjoyed the smoothest SAP transition despite our size and complexity relative to the other locations. Our team truly achieved the extraordinary.

Although coaching can follow a very formal process, the same principles can and should be applied during informal coaching moments as you come across them. Sometimes coaching is all about being in the right place at

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the right time. Now that you have a better appreciation for the nature and value of coaching, I encourage you to identify, seize, and optimize each and every coaching opportunity, thereby steering your employees and organization overall in the direction of achieving the extraordinary. **SF**

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