Coaching is about specifics, not generalities—specific behaviors, specific causes, and specific actions. But, it takes self-awareness and ownership for leaders to accept and respond to coaching.

Coaching for Improvement: An Essential Role for Team Leaders and Managers

Dr. Rick Brocato

Lean. Flat. Flexible. What do these words bring to your mind? If they make you think of health and fitness, you would probably be like a lot of people. To improve one's health and fitness is a major goal that most adults aim for. The benefit is obvious—achieving quality of life. As many individuals know, this worthwhile goal is not easy to attain. Many people use personal trainers to help them realize this special goal.

Health and fitness is also a goal to which most organizations aspire. The benefit is obvious—achieving performance excellence. Many organizations are relying on their team leaders and managers to assume the coaching role to help reach this goal. The coaching process is vital to achieving performance excellence in today's streamlined, diverse, global, and knowledge-based organization.

Our organizations are in transition from an old managerial paradigm of constancy (stable and uniform environment), conformity (compliance and routine rule), and command (giving orders and prescribing solutions)—to a new managerial paradigm of change (unpredictable and variable environment), collaboration (employee-management partnership and teamwork), and coaching (giving guidance and preparing others to be self-reliant). Figure 1 compares the old and new paradigms. So, what skills do today's ideal team leader and manager need?

Brian O'Reilly reported in his 1994 Fortune magazine article...

If today’s leader needs to become “a master of teamwork and a coach,” organizations need to understand what coaching is and how to help their team leaders and managers develop this vital role. According to Paula Caproni, director, Executive Skills Program, University of Michigan Business School, one root meaning of the word “coach” (originally a four-wheeled carriage) is to “convey a valued person from where he or she is to where he or she wants to be.” It is important to note that in this meaning we are carrying a person to “where he or she wants to be” not pushing them to where we want them to be. From this concept we understand that the coach is the vehicle that facilitates performance change; however, it is up to each individual we are coaching to have the “want” to make the change. The coach merely helps the change happen.

One definition of coaching is the process leaders use when they want to help a team member improve a specific work behavior or skill. On the other hand, there are many practices that are likely to guarantee failure in the coaching process, such as:

- Don’t get the team member involved; just talk “at” him/her.
- Don’t give specific feedback; talk in generalities.
- Concentrate on attitude, rather than behavior.
- Don’t discuss what has to be done to improve performance; assume the team member knows.
- Don’t follow up to ensure the agreed upon action has been taken.
- Don’t acknowledge or praise the team member when he/she makes the improvement.

If we change the negative “don’t” to the positive “do” in these statements, what we have are the six steps involved in a good coaching process.

**Performance Improvement Problems**

Many different types of performance problems exist that may be addressed by the coaching process. The potential causes of performance problems may be divided into two major categories—team member context and leader context. Let’s examine each.

**Cause One: Team Member/Work Context**

Some of the most frequently reported problems in this category include:
• **Job-person fit**
  There is a job mismatch because the wrong person is in the wrong job. Possible coaching solution? Help the person get into the right job.

• **Ambiguous work roles**
  There are unclear or confusing areas of responsibility. Possible coaching solution? Help clarify tasks and define areas of responsibility whenever possible.

• **Inadequate skills training**
  This exists either because a wrong assumption was made as to the competency level of the worker or new technology or work processes have been introduced. Possible coaching solution? Periodically perform a formal or informal needs analysis—either at appraisal time or when new demands are made on the team member—and then get the team member involved in a training program.

• **Lack of experience**
  Either the person has not had enough time on the job or he/she has not had the opportunity to perform specific types of work. Possible coaching solution? Set up situations that will give the team member opportunities to broaden his/her experience.

• **Others**
  Lack of motivation, wrong temperament, learning challenges, etc., all require their own unique solutions.

When addressing team member/work context problems, it beneficial to use a checklist as an aid when coaching for performance improvement. A simple checklist can help keep the new, or even the experienced coach on track. Answering the following questions can also assist the coach to prepare for meeting with the team member:

• What is the specific problem?
• Does the team member know that the problem exists?
• Does the team member know the performance expectations?
• Are there obstacles outside the team member’s control that are affecting his/her performance?
• Do negative consequences follow good performance?
• Do positive consequences follow good performance?

Along with the coaching checklist, the coaching analysis flowchart is often used to assist in the performance improvement process. (See Figure 2.) This flowchart is a strategic tool, used to determine if and how far to proceed in the performance improvement process. After using these two aids, the coach is ready to meet with the team member and proceed through the six-step coaching process mentioned previously.

**Figure 2**

**Performance Improvement: Coaching Analysis Flowchart**

- **Problem Analysis I**: Is this problem worth solving? (Will things improve if the problem is solved?)

  - **Yes**: Go to **Problem Analysis II**
  - **No**: Go to **Cause Analysis**

- **Problem Analysis II**: Define the performance deficiencies

  - **Assume a job structure (role, tasks, involvement) or managerial behavior (style, communication, feedback) cause exists**
  - **Assume a skill, knowledge, or personal cause exists**

- **Cause Analysis**: Could the employee do the job if he/she were given $1,000? (What is the root cause?)

  - **Situational Analysis**
    - Assume a job structure (role, tasks, involvement) or managerial behavior (style, communication, feedback) cause exists
    - Assume a skill, knowledge, or personal cause exists

- **Worth Analysis**: Is the value of the solution greater than its cost?

  - **No**: Go to **Outcome or terminate the employee**
  - **Yes**: Go to **Live with problem**

**Cause Two: Leader Context**

The second potential cause of performance improvement problems, which may be addressed by the coaching process, is the leader context. This is often a neglected area, yet it is vital to the success of the coach. So, it is very important to be familiar with this cause and its solutions. If we want to help team leaders and managers learn how to function effectively in the role of coach, we must help them become more aware of their strengths and weaknesses.
This problem exits, in part, because of a lack of emphasis on the necessity for the leader to develop self-awareness of his/her interpersonal skills/behaviors. Caproni reported, “Studies of managerial development have consistently concluded that self-awareness is a core managerial competency...Self-awareness can significantly enhance managerial performance, career success, and personal satisfaction.”

Of course the challenges managers routinely face, such as long work hours, impossible deadlines, high stress, and unexpected crises, etc., are often major obstacles to having the time necessary for self-reflection. In this case, the benefits far outweigh the costs. Let’s briefly examine some possible problems in this context and then look at two major potential solutions.

The following is a brief list of frequently cited problems in this category:
• Giving insufficient directions or unclear goals.
• Employing poor communication skills.
• Practicing ineffective listening skills.
• Possessing inadequate feedback skills.
• Using an inappropriate leadership/coaching style.

One approach used with some success in helping leaders become aware of these problems is 360° feedback. This involves a survey that solicits input (in the form of ratings) from the leader’s supervisor, colleagues, subordinates, and customers on a range of skills/behaviors. The results are then shared with the leader, who subsequently makes a plan of action for improvement.

Another methodology used very successfully to increase self-awareness of interpersonal skills/behaviors is called instrumented learning (e.g., self-directed assessments). Instrumented learning is especially suited for increasing self-awareness related to a single theme (e.g., communication, listening, feedback, coaching style, leadership, etc.) in a setting where the individual can decide how best to use the information. The instrument is self-scored and self-interpreted and the feedback is presented in a concise, meaningful, and non-threatening manner. Based on the feedback, leaders obtain a comprehensible representation of their strengths and opportunities for improvement in particular skills/behaviors. With this information leaders can develop personal development plans of action.

Why does instrumented learning work so effectively in the process of personal development? Stan Mann, vice president of research and education for Integrity Direct Inc., delineates some of the main reasons:

• Learning instruments help people become introspective. Many people, when asked to examine their attitudes, values, or behaviors, have difficulty beginning the process. They just don’t know where to begin. Learning instruments facilitate the process.
• Learning instruments bridge the gap between theory and practice. They answer the question, “How does this apply to me?” The involvement of the learner in the process provides an insight into the theory and possible applications in their life. It makes sense to them because they see the connection between their data and the theory.
• Learning instruments provide a structured process. Because the goal of most learning instruments is focused (e.g., how you manage time), the process can be highly structured and provide feedback to the learner. Receiving the data in small pieces, the learner can build on each step of the process and gain important insights.
• Learning instruments help participants transfer learning. The learning instrument aids participants in the application of what has been discovered in everyday situations. Because the process is so personal and involved, the move to application is easier. Many instruments have an action step in the process.
• Learning instruments are nontreating. Most learning instruments are self-administered and self-scored so
### Figure 4

**Plan of Action and Commitment Timetable**
(Adapted from Empowering the Leader Within, by Rick Brocato, Joan and Marc De Simone)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skills/Behaviors:</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Determine which skills/behaviors need attention by referring to the results of the relevant self-assessment instrument and your responses to the plan of action questions.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Personal Mission Statement:</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Write a statement that focuses on what you want to be (managerial character) and do (achievements and/or contributions) for the skills/behaviors you are developing.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I want to be (e.g., an active listener)</td>
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<tr>
<td>So that I can (e.g., better diagnose problems as a coach)</td>
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<tr>
<th>Goals:</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Write S.M.A.R.T. goals (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, tangible/timely) for each area of improvement.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Short-Term (six months to one year):</td>
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<tr>
<td>Midterm (three to five years):</td>
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<tr>
<th>Change Strategy:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List the specific actions you will take, in order from easiest to hardest, to accomplish the changes and/or reach the goals you desire:</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specific Action</th>
<th>Start Date</th>
<th>End Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
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<td>2.</td>
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<td>3.</td>
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<td>4.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Visualization:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Form a clear mental image of each goal as though it is already actualized. Imagine yourself in a hot-air balloon; you are looking down on yourself one year from now. Picture a perfect environment. How improved are your coaching skills/behaviors? How is your team doing? How is your organization doing?</td>
<td></td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affirmation:</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Write a sentence stating a specific reality about your future self, improvement, benefits of the change, etc., as though the reality already was factual. Finish the statement: As a result of positive action, I am beginning to realize...</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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The comfort level of the participant is dramatically increased. People deal with the feedback provided on a personal level and disclosure is always optional. The foundation of coaching success lies in understanding yourself, understanding others, and realizing the impact of personal behavior on others.

So, by using the instrumented learning approach, the team leader or manager who aspires to be a coach can acquire an understanding of his/her personal style, which will help him/her to:
- Gain insight into his/her own and others' behaviors.
- Work more effectively with others.
• Enhance interpersonal communication.
• Improve their coaching effectiveness.

One of the most extensively researched, reliable, and popular self-assessment instruments for learning about personal style is the DiSC® Dimensions of Behavior (Inscape Publishing). More than 30 million people have used this learning approach. It helps people explore behavior across four primary dimensions: Dominance, Influence, Steadiness, and Conscientiousness. DiSC is a comprehensive, self-scoring, and self-interpreting profile that provides an in-depth knowledge about an individual’s behavioral characteristics and preferences. Through a multilevel interpretation process, individuals better understand what motivates them, what kind of environment they prefer, and what they can do to be more effective coaches. This instrument is useful for helping leaders discover their individual strengths and to appreciate and value others. (See Figure 3.)

Self-awareness is the coach’s first step to understanding. A logical next step is to develop a personal plan of action for improvement. To aid in this process, it is helpful to reflect on what was learned during the self-assessments and to respond to some specific questions, such as:
• What are your behavioral strengths (e.g., listening, feedback, personal style, etc.) as you relate to others?
• How can these strengths contribute to your coaching relationship with an individual or team?
• What behavioral strengths of other people on your team are most different from yours?
• How can you better communicate with people whose strengths are different from yours?

The final step in establishing the plan of action is to select specific areas for improvement and set some related goals. As an aid to this process, the format shown in Figure 4 may be useful.

Conclusion

For more than a decade, organizations have undergone revolutionary changes. Because of increased competition in the global marketplace most Fortune 500 companies have streamlined their operations greatly. This has resulted in laying off thousands of people and eliminating many middle managers’ jobs. The new mantra for the remaining team leaders and managers is “Do more with less.” Because of this paradigm shift, employees are expected to share more in the traditional management functions—planning and decision making, organizing, leading, and controlling. Self-managed work teams and other collaborative organizational forms have emerged. As a result, the managerial job is changing from the traditional role of “boss” to that of “coach.”

In today’s pressured-packed organizational environment, the need for team leaders and managers to do more with less is a constant demand. One way to meet that demand is to get the best possible performance from the most valuable resource—people. The coaching process is one of the most powerful ways to improve that performance. But, to be effective, the coach must know him- or herself and come to value the difference in others.

Caproni summed it up best, “Self-Awareness is a hallmark of effective managers. Successful managers understand what motivates them and how their strengths and weaknesses influence their decisions, actions, and relationships. Successful managers also understand the importance of developing a critical quality called managerial character.”

One of the best ways to achieve this self-awareness and managerial character is through self-reflection on personal skills/behaviors. The instrumented learning (self-directed assessment) approach is one of the most effective tools in the self-reflection process. Being self-aware increases an individual’s effectiveness in a range of people situations and provides insights into the behaviors of others. And, finally, it helps develop a role essential for today’s team leader and manager—coaching for improvement.

References

Brocato, Rick C., De Simone, Joan and Marc, Empowering the Leader Within. (Baltimore: Virtus Press, 1995).


