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The Most Important Manager Competency: Coaching Skills Part 1 of 2

By Joe Hunt

The most important thing an effective manager must do is clearly define what they are supposed to personally deliver vs. what they should enable others to deliver.

The very definition of a manager is one who enables others to deliver. The only way to sustainably maximize results is to coach your people, not tell them what to do and how to do it.

Managers who effectively harness their coaching skills reap multiple benefits. Their employees are more committed, willing to put in greater effort and are less likely to leave.

Coaching's impact significantly affects people and profits within organizations committed to training managers, guiding performance and developing employees.

Most managers have had some training in coaching people for high performance. Ten years ago, 73% of managers received some form of training, according to global leadership-development firm, BlessingWhite.

Their 2015 report, however, reveals that employees who receive regular feedback through coaching conversations are now in the minority.



Why Don't More Managers Coach?

Managers usually cite lack of time as the main excuse for failing to coach employees, but the real reasons may be different, note John H. Zenger and Kathleen Stinnett in *The Extraordinary Coach: How the Best Leaders Help Others Grow* (McGraw-Hill).

Three common barriers stand in the way:

1. Misconceptions of what coaching is.
2. A desire to avoid difficult conversations.
3. No clear game plan for initiating and framing coaching conversations.

Once they return to the office after training, many managers revert to old habits. Instead of taking time to ask questions and find solutions, they find it easier to explain and provide instructions. Finding a quick fix and moving on is their default response.

The Manager-Fixer

Despite good intentions, the "manager-fixer" creates numerous problems:

1. Quick fixes don't teach people to think for themselves. When managers explain what needs to be done, some learning may occur, but it isn't necessarily retained. Employee engagement is minimal.
2. When work is challenging, employees will look to their managers for a quick and easy fix. They're denied any sense of ownership or autonomy. When people aren't fully engaged or empowered, their job satisfaction significantly decreases.
3. This leads to a third problem: Managers who fix problems encourage dependency, thereby creating additional work for themselves. Being the hero who comes to the rescue may boost your ego, but you'll become increasingly overwhelmed with work and ultimately create a bottleneck.



The Manager-Coach

Many managers believe they lack the necessary time for coaching conversations. Yet, 70% of employee learning and development happens on the job, not through formal training. If line managers are unsupportive or uninvolved, employee growth, engagement and retention are stunted.

Let's address the three reasons why managers fail to coach.

1. Misconceptions of What Coaching Is

Skilled managers initiate coaching conversations so their people can explore what they do and how they do it. Coaching expands employee awareness, uncovers better solutions, and allows employees to make and implement sound decisions.

Coaching provides a safe platform for growth. Successful managers consciously choose growth as a priority outcome. They understand that developing people is as important as getting things done.

Coaching isn't instructing, mentoring, counseling, cheerleading, therapy or directing, although there are some similarities. Coaching skills include:

- *Clarifying an interaction's outcome and agreeing to a conversation's goal*
- *Listening to what is—and isn't—said*
- *Asking non-leading questions to expand awareness*
- *Exploring possibilities, consequences, actions and decisions*
- *Eliciting a desired future state*
- *Establishing goals and expectations, including stretch goals*
- *Providing support*
- *Following up on progress*
- *Setting accountability agreements*



"Strangely, at most companies, coaching isn't part of what managers are formally expected to do. Even though research makes it clear that employees and job candidates alike value learning and career development above most other aspects of a job, many managers don't see it as an important part of their role."

Monique Valcour from her Harvard Business Review article: *You Can't Be a Great Manager If You're Not a Good Coach*

Managers must be non-directive, listen intently and ask the right questions. Coach training emphasizes supporting people, with an eye toward challenging them.

As a manager, you're tasked with bringing out the best in people, including high performance and bottom-line results. When you take up the coaching baton, performance goals must share the stage with employee growth and development.

Many managers struggle to balance direction and support. They're usually afraid of making mistakes, so they revert to telling employees what to do instead of coaching them.

2. A Desire to Avoid Difficult Conversations

Coaching conversations require time and energy, but they're the only way to gain trust, honesty and transparency. If you're unwilling to invest the required time and effort, coaching will inevitably fail. Both parties must be committed to creating a positive relationship.

Managers must be fully present during coaching conversations, which means turning off phones and email alerts during sessions. Keep any promises you make, and be sure to emphasize that you'll maintain confidentiality.



3. No Game Plan for Coaching Conversations

Even after training, many managers have trouble initiating coaching conversations, let alone developing a process that expedites desired results.

Many models exist, but the best are short, simple and easy to employ whenever coaching opportunities arise. Coaching needn't be scheduled as 50-minute sessions. With a solid framework, you can achieve results in as little as 10 minutes.

In Part 2, we will explore some of these models which have proven to effectively enhance coaching conversations and the relationships between coaches and protégés.

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