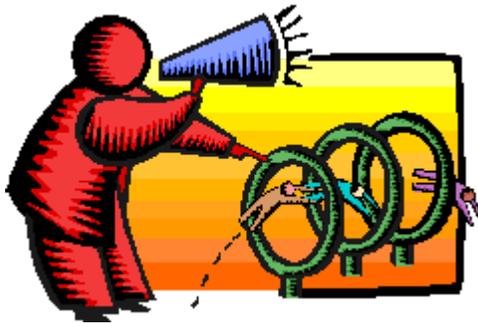


Coaching: Increasing Employees' Competence



In a Nutshell

Managing people in the new millennium is becoming less about "command and control" and more about "development and empowerment." Increasingly, managers are taking some responsibility for ensuring that their staff members always have the **knowledge** and **skills** necessary to perform at a high level. Managers are doing more coaching.

Coaching is a form of employee training and development. When new competencies are needed due to a change in the work situation, or when poor performance indicates that remedial instruction is needed, managers can fill the gap through coaching. Over time, coaching can also prepare employees for advancement and additional responsibility.

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Why Should Managers Coach?

Managers coach in order to build employees' knowledge and skills. Unless managers are handed a staff that possesses all of the knowledge and skills they will ever need to do their jobs, some learning must take place during the employment relationship. Coaching is simply a way that managers supplement any formal training and on-the-job learning that their employees get, and a way to give remedial instruction when performance deficiencies necessitate it.

Coaching can also be part of a long-term effort to promote employee development. One of the criteria that leaders are evaluated on is how well they develop others. Some CEOs who are very effective at achieving goals such as expanding the business and boosting stock values do a poor job of preparing their replacements. When they leave, their former firm can flounder because no one was prepared to take over. One characteristic of the best leaders is that they groom others. Of course, managers are not the sole providers of executive coaching. Consultants are also often hired to coach executives. That kind of coaching focuses more on interpersonal skills and leadership styles than on technical competence. Although executive coaching is a growing industry, this *LeaderLetter* is focused on the coaching that managers personally provide their staff.

Coaching Versus Counseling

While managers can easily recognize the need for coaching when their employees have new jobs, duties or tools, managers often fail to diagnose the need for coaching when their employees are performing poorly. As the [May 4 LeaderLetter](#) explains, counseling is the appropriate response when employees' motivation problems are the cause of poor performance. But, managers need to remember that not all performance problems are due to a lack of motivation. Poor performance can also be the result of misunderstandings or a lack of skill. Many of us can recall a situation when a manager chastised us for screwing something up when all we really needed

was a clarification of what was expected. *How demoralizing!*

Although coaching and counseling have different purposes, they're interrelated. Sometimes coaching reveals attitude problems, fears or other factors that interfere with the willingness to do one's job. When such barriers to motivation are identified, managers must shift into a counseling mode to resolve them before engaging in coaching. There's no point in working on employees' "Can't Do" problems before resolving their "Won't Do" problems. By the same token, needs for coaching can also emerge during counseling. For instance, when an employee is intimidated by the complexity of a task, that fear can be manifested in a number of counterproductive work behaviors such as procrastination. Consequently, coaching is a remedy for some of the motivation problems that managers identify when counseling their employees.

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Steps in Coaching

Coaching is a form of employee training and development, whether it's on-the-job or off, planned or impromptu. The science of employee training and development can't easily be reduced to a bullet list of steps to follow, and you may notice some glaring omissions from the list below. With that disclaimer in mind, here's a list of a few steps for managers to use when coaching their employees.

- **Put the employee at ease.** This step is important when the coaching session is a response to poor performance--it's not as important in other situations.
- **Find out what they already know.** There are two reasons for this. First, there's little use in telling them what they already know. Second, prior knowledge serves as the foundation for new knowledge that's acquired. Hence, you want to link the "training" to what they already know and correct any misconceptions that could interfere with their learning.
- **Present information or demonstrate work methods.** This is the point where you deliver the content of the training.
- **Repeat.** Repetition enhances understanding and retention.
- **Evaluate learning.** Test whether the employee understands the information or can perform the skill.
- **Provide feedback.** Let the employee know what they have successfully learned and what they still need to learn.
- **Correct.** Show the right answers or methods again.
- **Evaluate performance on the job.** Periodically check to see whether the employee is using the knowledge or skills effectively on the job. Gradually increase the interval at which you check. The employee should eventually take responsibility for monitoring their own performance.
- **Reward.** Provide praise or other rewards for successful acquisition and use of the knowledge or skill.

The degree of specificity used in instructing staff members can vary. Sometimes managers coach by guiding their staff members through the process of figuring things out for themselves. Middle- and upper-level managers whose reports are other managers and professionals may rely more on monitoring their staffs' professional development, helping them see opportunities for self-improvement, and encouraging them to continue to progress in their development. In contrast, coaching entry-level employees might involve much more explicit instruction. Nonetheless, the steps listed above fit most managerial coaching situations pretty well.

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About the Newsletter and Subscriptions

LeaderLetter is written by Dr. Scott Williams, Department of Management, [Raj Sooin College of Business](#),

Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio. It is a supplement to my MBA 751 - Managing People in Organizations class. It is intended to reinforce the course concepts and maintain communication among my former MBA 751 students, but anyone is welcome to subscribe. In addition, subscribers are welcome to forward this newsletter to anyone who they believe would have an interest in it. To [subscribe](#), simply send an e-mail message to me requesting subscription. Of course, subscriptions to the newsletter are free. To [unsubscribe](#), e-mail a reply indicating that you would like to unsubscribe.

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E-mail Your Comments

Whether you are one of my former students or not, I invite you to share any insights or concerns you have regarding the topic of this newsletter or any other topic relating to management skills. Please [e-mail](#) them to me. Our interactions have been invaluable. **Every week, I learn something new from *LeaderLetter* subscribers!** Let's keep the conversation going.

A Halloween Joke

There was this haunted house on the outskirts of the town which was avoided by all the townfolk. The ghost that "lived" there was feared by all.

However, an enterprising journalist decided to get the scoop of the day by photographing the fearsome phantom. When he entered the house, armed with only his camera, the ghost descended upon him, clanking chains. He told the ghost, "I mean you no harm. I just want your photograph." The ghost was quite happy at this chance to make the headlines. He posed for a number of ghostly shots.

The happy journalist rushed back to his dark room, and began developing the photos. Unfortunately, they turned out to be black and underexposed. So what's the moral of the story?

The spirit was willing but the flash was weak.

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RAJ SOIN
College of Business
WRIGHT STATE
UNIVERSITY

