

THE MANAGER AS COACH

Although the concept of coaching in the athletic arena is certainly not new, the concept of coaching employees in the workplace has gained prominence over just the last ten years or so. More and more organizations expect their managers to become coaches, but unfortunately the coaching approach is often ill-defined. Just what does it mean to be a coach as opposed to being a boss? For one thing, workplace coaches operate from a base of personal power. That is, they utilize their interpersonal skills in communicating and building relationships with employees to achieve success in improving performance. The position power approach ("Do it because I'm the boss, and I say so!") is not utilized by coaches, and generally yields disappointing results with today's employees. Coaches seek to collaborate with, not control, their subordinates. They proactively seek ways to improve the performance of both their organization and those individuals that comprise it; they are not simply firefighters who operate in a reactive mode. Coaches strive to innovate and seek alignment with organizational objectives, as opposed to the status quo, "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" approach commonly followed by bosses.

When employed correctly, coaching results in a win-win-win situation: the employee's performance improves, the organization enjoys a better overall standard of performance from its employees, and, by increasing the competence of those within his team, the manager frees up time to concentrate on his managerial role.

Fortunately, we don't have to be born with coaching skills in order to succeed as a workplace coach. Coaching can be learned, but may require a changed mindset for those with an autocratic management style. Effective coaching requires the establishment of the following ground rules:

De-personalize negative feedback. So as to avoid causing defensiveness, the coach must focus on the behaviors at hand, not the person. (The opposite of this is true when offering positive feedback, however; heap personal praise on the individual who performs well.)

Focus on the means, not the end. In other words, when shaping an employee's performance, focus attention on his behaviors, not the results of those behaviors. The effective coach realizes that positive results will occur if the employee simply follows the proper steps along the way.

Get the other person's opinion. Above all else, coaching is a two-way process. An effective coach is also a good listener who actively solicits input from employees.

Emphasize mutual responsibility. Supervisors often underestimate the impact that their behavior has on that of their subordinates. A supervisor with a negative attitude toward the workplace and/or her employees will generally have a poorly-performing team of employees. An effective coach is keenly aware that she has a tremendous impact on the success of her work group and wields this impact carefully.

Work on building strengths, not improving weaknesses. Capitalize on what an employee does well and help him perfect those skills. This is a more positive approach than focusing on weaknesses that generally yields more satisfied and successful employees.

Be timely with feedback. Feedback, whether positive or negative, is a time-sensitive commodity. Its result is always more effective when it is given as close to the event as possible.

Be clear and direct. Don't beat around the bush when addressing an issue with an employee. More often than not, employees misinterpret the meaning of a veiled message, resulting in unsatisfactory consequences.

Coaching is an individualized, one-on-one process. Each employee brings a different set of skills to the workplace. A one-size-fits-all approach to improving behavior just doesn't work. To be successful in improving performance, coaches must invest the time and effort to truly know and grow their employees' performance.