

Stories of people improving the way their organization runs.

Innovative

Management



ECONOMY AND ATTITUDE—HOW ARE WE THINKING?

REAL LEADERS ARE ATTENDING TO A 360° ENVIRONMENT

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Seven Ways to Improve Management Through the Art of Coaching

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You're an effective manager. You've mastered the skills of goal setting, delegating, directing, problem-solving, and more. Yet there are times when you think things could be running even better, and you wonder what can help make that happen. If that's true for you, or your organization, we suggest you investigate how coaching can be a powerful tool for improving individual performance and building the corporate culture you want.

Introduction

Coaching helps people to live and work more consciously and to bring out the best in themselves. In our experience, the ability of managers to move into higher levels of success requires the addition of some sophisticated coaching skills to their repertoire. Learning and using these skills helps make work more fun, and many people find it easier to meet their objectives. In the process managers build deeper and more productive relationships with their employees, fostering greater organizational loyalty. The ability to use coaching skills effectively will make a manager a much better leader, one who will garner more respect, loyalty, and success.

The process of coaching helps managers and employees improve their lives and work

So what is coaching? As our colleague Jan Elflin points out,

The roots of professional coaching can be traced back to the Inner Game books of the mid-1970s. In these books, tennis coach Tim Gallway suggested a paradigm shift in sports coaching. He noticed that players self corrected when he coached with open questions, instead of catching errors and offering corrections. In fact, when a player listened to the advice and tried, performance diminished. When a player relaxed, and held a picture and feeling of the desired result, the player's performance improved. The player self-corrected, without ever knowing that he or she had ever been in error.

Coaching defined

Coaching is defined by the International Coach Federation (ICF) as *"an ongoing partnership that helps clients produce fulfilling results in their personal and professional lives. Through the process of coaching clients deepen their learning, improve their performance, and enhance their quality of life."*

In coaching, the solutions are devised by the person being coached. The role of a coach is to use communication skills and techniques to help a person work and live more consciously. Coaches do not give advice. They do not act as the content expert. A good coach has highly developed process skills that bring out the best in the person they are coaching. It is the skill of the coach that enables clients to discover their own answers.

Coaching encourages self-improvement

There are several roles that are commonly confused with coaching in many organizations. They are:

- Mentoring. A mentor has been there, done that, then gives sage advice.
-

Being clear about what coaching is

Being clear about what coaching is, continued

- Consulting. A consultant analyzes a problem and offers advice.
- Training. Training teaches people new skills and information.
- Counseling. Counseling helps people resolve problems so they can live functionally on a day-to-day basis.

Of course, managers must play some of the above roles at certain times but it's important to understand that those roles are not coaching.

Managers must be trustworthy to coach

Managers who effectively use coaching skills must have a genuine capability to listen deeply, be fully present to the direct report, and to individualize their approach to the employee's needs. They also need to be skillful at drawing out plans and ideas from the client to help them move toward success. The employee is consistently encouraged to develop more behavioral flexibility, to try the unfamiliar, and to venture into new territory at a pace that works for him or her. Coaching is more than maintaining a dialogue with employees or clients. It is about having a high trust relationship and an adequate technology to support it. One such technology is Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), a study of human excellence from which many of the more powerful coach processes and methods have originated.

Clients find their own solutions

When coaching, a manager will operate from the assumption that the employee is fully capable of figuring out how to reach his or her goals in the best way. The coach also recognizes that the employees being coached have the ability to identify the resources and abilities they need, and are able to use them effectively. The coaching relationship—and it is a relationship—moves the client toward an increased awareness of his or her behavioral choices.

Coaching increases motivation

When people increase their choice of behaviors as a result of the coaching process, they have much more investment in the organization's success. This is because they are aware, in an ongoing way, that the efforts they make and the resulting contributions come from their own design. They have made their own choices and have taken the actions. They are getting more of both the responsibility and the credit for the achievement.

Coaching improves performance and culture

One of the managers with whom we spoke told us that in his organization in recent years, a great effort was made to hire just the right person who, it was hoped, would figure out the system and begin to do well right away. "We'd hire good people," he said, "and if they didn't work out then they were not the right one. Sometimes we got lucky, and that reinforced the practice. Now, as the workforce is demanding more from employers, the company is putting a lot more effort into developing the employee with more training and coaching." He states that the company is now doing better financially and has a much better work atmosphere.

Managers that coach

Over the past several years, an emerging trend in global management has been to expect managers to act as coaches. Why is that happening? What is the difference between managers who coach and those who don't? We interviewed a sampling of

thirty successful managers from entrepreneurial companies to *Fortune* 50 organizations. They ranged in position from CEO to front-line manager. We asked them six questions:

1. What are the challenges you faced in obtaining high performance from direct reports?
2. How do you currently coach direct reports to achieve higher performance?
3. What does coaching mean to you?
4. Have you ever been coached and, if so, what worked for you about it?
5. What skill sets do managers need to be effective at coaching?
6. Do most of the managers you work with have the skill sets needed to coach effectively?

Through our survey we came to some useful understandings about how the most effective managers use coaching skills to:

- A. More consistently develop their direct reports.
- B. Strengthen their corporate cultures.
- C. Achieve desired results.

From these discussions, we distilled the following seven guidelines for using coaching skills within the management context. Our selection criteria were based upon the frequency with which the managers we interviewed mentioned these guidelines and the importance they gave them.

1. Ask high-impact questions that draw out the highest and best thinking in your direct reports to help them develop their own answers and move them to action.

Asking a good question is a skill that usually has a higher impact than giving a good answer. High-impact questions in coaching are those that help a person think through something and articulate it. Interestingly, they also stimulate thinking in the questioner, creating a more creative and promising relationship. They get people to open up and feel acknowledged. What are high-impact questions?

- High-impact questions tend to be open-ended vs. closed-ended. For example, consider these two ways of asking the same question: “What is your next step?” or “Do you know what you are going to do next?” Did you notice how the latter question stops your thinking, whereas the first question promotes it?
- High-impact questions are often “how” and “what” questions that spur action vs. “why” questions that require explanations, justifications, or encourage defensiveness. For instance, “Why can’t you complete this before August 1st?” could elicit a number of defensive, not useful, excuses or explanations. A question worded differently – “How can we complete this in the quickest amount of time?” can lead to more useful and even innovative ideas.
- High-impact questions lead people to persuade themselves. As an employee formulates plans, actions, and ideas, they own the responses and feel more convinced of the possibilities. When people are told what to do, or how to do it, they often counter with resistance. When employees figure out the answer for themselves, they feel empowered.

Respondent comments regarding high-impact questions

- We are discovering that when we develop a level of inquiry with staff, rather than dictating, we get a much higher quality of feedback from them about what we need to do as managers to help our entire company be successful.
—Peter Skelton, Director of Project Management, Walters and Wolf

Managers that coach, continued

Seven guidelines for effective coaching

Seven
guidelines
for effective
coaching,
continued

- My former CEO, the late David Krantz, used to ask me open-ended, very powerful questions to help me think more deeply and in new directions. I never got the sense in our discussions that he was trying to sway me one way or the other. It's very easy to tell people what to do. That doesn't help a person help himself or herself the next time. It requires much more skill to remain neutral, ask content-free questions, and trust that others have the answers within. —*Jeff Hayes, Co-President, CPP, Inc.*
- Managers are becoming more aware of the power of asking rather than telling. Telling seems more efficient, but in the long run it is not. Asking a lot of clarifying questions so that direct reports become conscious of their perceived barriers creates a pathway to success. —*Cathy Schmidt, Executive VP for Retail Banking, Citizens Bank*
- Simply put, managers who ask questions rather than tell will be more successful. —*Ron Crough, President, Vosara, Inc.*
- Focus on the answers that bring out the best thinking about the situation and ask your next high-impact question. Rarely do I see an effective CEO hammer someone. —*Dan Thomas, President of FOCUS, Inc.*
- Managers that coach ask questions that are non-directive and couched in openness, so the direct reports are empowered to come to their own answers. Asking direct reports these kinds of questions invites them to raise their personal standards and their expectations of themselves. —*Tom Hoobyar, CEO, ASEPCO, Inc.*
- Coaching to me is leadership coaching. The difference between the coach and the consultant is that the coach has questions and the consultant has answers. I believed the person being coached has the answers. People don't need someone to tell them what to do. They need support – in the form of questions that take them to their own answers. —*Terry Pearce, Author, Consultant, Adjunct Professor, Haas School of Business for UC Berkeley and the London School of Business*

2. *When coaching a direct report, focus upon what is working, rather than trying to fix problems.*

Coaching is success driven. Rather than focusing on problem solving or fixing things, a coaching relationship strives to identify what one is doing right and then making more of it. There's an old Hawaiian saying: "Energy flows where attention goes." When attention is focused on a problem, it can limit success because the energy is focused on what's wrong, what is not wanted. When a problem-solving frame is placed around an issue, we ask questions like: "What is wrong?" "What is the problem?" "Who or what is causing it?" "How long has it been a problem?" "What analysis has been done or do we need to do to solve it?" "What are our solutions?" These questions may be useful as a diagnostic, but do not propel an organization toward success. They miss the point of "What we are doing well?", which is the foundation of the understanding necessary for success.

When coached well, the employee's attention is directed to successful behaviors and positive experiences that you (and the employee) want to be certain that they keep doing. There are a number of specific methods for doing this. One such method follows. Try it out and you are very likely to discover something useful for yourself.

Identify, in your mind, a time when you were at your most effective best, and recall it as fully as possible. Mentally put yourself back into it, so you are fully present in it. Answer the following questions, not just as a memory, but using present tense as if you were back there all over again. If you take a moment to write your answers out; it will be even more useful for you.

1. In this specific circumstance, what are you doing?
2. What are you paying attention to most?

3. What are your goals?
4. What is your evidence for success?
5. What are you valuing the most or like best about this experience?
6. What would you like to bring forward into the future from this experience, or what are you learning that you'd like to keep and take into the future with you?

Respondent comments regarding the focus of attention

- I have observed that the most effective CEOs give a lot of positive feedback. Appreciating what is working ensures you will get more of it. —*Dan Thomas, President of FOCUS, Inc.*
- It's important to celebrate the individual and their achievements, giving quick praise; to have and demonstrate respect for the individual. —*Michele Horne, MD, Director of Rochester Medical Services, Eastman Kodak*
- One of my direct reports asked me if I could tell her what she was doing well before I asked her for more. This simple request on her part helped me to understand her needs and meet them. —*Jeff Hayes, Co-President, CPP, Inc.*

3. Stay focused on the result you want—the outcome, the objective. Have the direct report define what success looks like, feels like, and sounds like.

In business it is typically much more profitable, in the broad sense of the word, to set a fixed outcome and then vary your behaviors to achieve it than it is to create a fixed procedure that results in variable outcomes. When coaching, it is helpful to ask direct reports in-depth questions about their desired results. You want to help the employee to be very clear about the benefits to be gained. Questions might include:

1. What do you want to accomplish? (This should be stated in the positive and can be initiated and controlled by the person.)
2. In what specific contexts do you want it?
3. What will be your evidence for success in reaching the goal? What will you see, hear, and feel to let you know it has been achieved?

A worthwhile NLP/coaching technique to help accomplish this is the “as-if” process. In your mind, you act as if is true, as if it were actually happening. This technique is modeled from highly effective communicators. It helps you get very clear on what you want to have happen, how you will know (sensory-based evidence) that you have achieved it, and the specific context. Then you mentally step into the future, imagining that you are fully experiencing what it is like to have realized it. This kind of imagining is highly motivating, as it lets you “feel” the success that you think you want. It can also help you discover any downsides that might arise.

Respondent comments about focusing attention on what you want

- Too often energy can be focused on problems. When it is, you need to redirect it toward quality results. —*Stacy Shoun, Hub Manager, FedEx*
- The worst managers tell people what to do. The best ones make sure objectives are clear to their direct reports and then ask really good questions. It is critical to get clear about what output of work is expected to make sure people have the skills to do the job. —*Dan Thomas, President of FOCUS, Inc.*
- Each direct report has viewpoints—belief systems—that may lead them to make limiting assumptions. Asking open-ended powerful questions helps move them past their assumptions toward the best outcome. Your vision has to be large enough so that direct reports have enough room to expand it to include their

Seven
guidelines
for effective
coaching,
continued

contribution. Then they can take pride in what they do rather than just accept a task that they have to do from someone else. —Dale Martin, *President, Orchard Executive Growth*

4. *Build rapport and trust.*

Several of the managers interviewed discussed the importance of making it safe for the employee to express his shortcomings, frustrations, and tribulations. Without clear trust there is no honest coaching in the employee-manager relationship. In the 1970s, organizational effectiveness researcher Jack Gibb wrote and taught how important it is to have trust in the work environment. Without adequate trust to be yourself and speak your mind honestly, burnout occurs. His research showed how low-trust organizations stole people's energy, spirit, and effectiveness. In "Defensive Communication," Gibb wrote:

One way to understand communication is to view it as a people process rather than a language process. If one is to make fundamental improvements in communication, one must make changes in interpersonal relationships.

One possible type of alteration... is that of reducing the degree of defensiveness. Defensive behavior is defined as that behavior which occurs when an individual perceives threat or anticipates threat in the group. The person who behaves defensively, even though he also gives some attention to the common task, devotes an appreciable portion of his energy to defending himself. Besides talking about the topic, he thinks about how he appears to others, how he may be seen more favorably, how he may win, dominate, impress, or escape punishment, and/or how he may avoid or mitigate a perceived or an anticipated attack.

Such inner feelings and outward acts tend to create similarly defensive postures in others; and, if unchecked, the ensuing circular response becomes increasingly destructive. Defensive behavior, in short, engenders defensive listening, and this in turn produces postural, facial, and verbal cues, which raise the defense level of the original communicator.

Defense arousal prevents the listener from concentrating upon the message. Not only do defensive communicators send off multiple value, motive, and affect cues, but also defensive recipients distort what they receive. As a person becomes more and more defensive, he becomes less and less able to perceive accurately the motives, the values, and the emotions of the sender. My analysis of recorded discussions revealed that increases in defensive behavior were correlated positively with losses in efficiency in communication. Specifically, distortions become greater when defensive states exist in the groups. The converse, moreover, also is true. The more "supportive" or defense reductive the climate, the less the receiver reads into the communication distorted loadings which arise from projections of his own anxieties, motives, and concerns. As defenses are reduced, the receivers become better able to concentrate upon the structure, the content, and the cognitive meanings to the message.

Employees need to know that it is safe to not immediately have all the right answers and that they can speak their mind, without judgment, criticism, or reprisal. Obviously, there are not a lot of specific techniques for this. Making it safe for the employee requires that the manager-coach feels safe and secure in him/herself and that he or she has set an intent for this. This may not be easy at first, as most people have not had a large number of experiences where they can articulate their thoughts without judgment. Managers who have received good coaching will have a much better ability to carry it forward, as it will be in their experience.

Respondent comments about trust

- Build rapport with your direct reports so it is safe for them to talk. All of your behaviors should foster trust. —Stacy Shoun, *Hub Manager, FedEx*
- I really enjoy the people I work with—and I want to understand what their needs are for leadership support. I actually ask the question, "What support do you need from me?" —Jeff Hayes, *Co-President, CPP, Inc.*
- Coaching means to me that I can trust my boss completely... that there will be no repercussions. That my manager will help me think more broadly and deeply,

and help me see things I wasn't seeing. I think one of the biggest problems in management is when a direct report can't bounce their ideas or discuss their problems because of not looking good, or politics, or whatever their fear is about. —Yvonne Myers, Human Resources Director, Legacy Marketing Group

Seven guidelines
for effective
coaching,
continued

5. Hold your direct reports accountable. You get what you expect.

To be accountable simply means to give an account. Once the outcomes are clear, and actions are planned and executed, the direct report gives an accounting. Not just about what happened, but also about the process they used to complete (or not) the agreed upon actions.

Agreed upon accountability is an excellent way to create a good feedback loop. It provides motivation for actions being taken, and provides a method for the employee's growth on the job. At first blush it may sound like the manager is imposing a set of tasks on employees and then holding them accountable for completion. It is, instead, holding the employee accountable for completing his or her own agenda, which can be highly motivating, when it comes to completing tasks on time and on quality.

Weight Watchers, which uses an NLP based psychological plan, provides success-based accountability as a specific technique. For example, the counselors who work at Weight Watchers hold members accountable by doing a weekly weigh-in. Thus members are accountable for their eating patterns, which are based upon their own goals throughout the week. If they go off the plan and gain a couple of pounds, it will show up with their next weigh in. The beauty in holding members accountable this way is that the counselor never has to give negative feedback, because the feedback is based on what the scale says.

Accountability in coaching is really an agreement between a coach and the manager that something will be accomplished. There is an agreement on what is to be done (i.e. specific end results); when it will be done and what evidence will be used to ascertain that it has in fact been done. The manager might ask, "What would I be able to see, hear, or feel to let me know that is accomplished on time and on quality?"

Respondent comments on accountability

- One of the challenges any manager faces is instituting realistic planning and control processes so direct reports are on time and on quality. —Dan Thomas, President, FOCUS, Inc.
- One of the most important coaching skills for managers is holding direct reports accountable. You get what you expect. Your follow-up is critical and builds credibility. It is important for them to know that you're not going to disappear. —Cathy Schmidt, Executive VP for Retail Banking, Citizens Bank

6. Listen deeply with your eyes, ears, and heart. Be fully present. Turn off your cell phone, hold your calls, and close your door.

This coaching skill is more of a "state" than a strategy. Good coaches hold a state of curiosity and interest. They make eye contact and listen clearly, often backtracking through what the employee says, using the employee's own key words. They are there for the client and hold his/her agenda throughout the meeting. When managers

coach, it is imperative that they do the same, eschewing the need to give advice or solve the person's problem.

Respondent comments about being fully present for the client

- I see coaching as an art form. One of the most important skills is being able to listen and really hear what the person being coached is saying. —Saul Macias, HR Director, The Gordon & Betty Moore Foundation
- One of the things that has worked for me in my career was when my manager coached me by looking at me as a whole person, was open and listened to me, helped me to figure out what I needed to do rather than just telling me. I really appreciate when my manager acts as a neutral facilitator so I can figure out the solution for myself. —Andrea Salvemini, Regional Director of Sales, Dynasplint, Inc.
- Dialogue is the key to coaching. This means no interruptions, being fully present with the direct report being coached in that meeting. —Richard Huston, Materials Manager, Bio-Rad Laboratories
- When I coach, I sit down with my direct report, give them my absolutely undivided attention, feel and listen to what they are saying, ask them open-ended questions, and give relevant context. This is very important to help them make the decision that is required in the situation. —Pete Przybylinski, Vice President of Sales, Duckhorn Wine Company

7. Model what you desire from your direct reports. Walk your talk.

Most of the managers we interviewed had, not surprisingly, received very little coaching during their careers. When they were coached in the way we have described in this article, they reported that they had their best work experiences and performed at their best.

For many managers, coaching seems like a difficult process that requires a lot of time and energy. It often feels more efficient, if less satisfying, to provide instruction, to delegate means and methods, and to direct people. There is also a fairly widespread belief, which a couple of our interviewees mentioned, that great leaders have a special charisma and are lucky to have great communication skills. Actually, all of the coaching skills are learnable, and in the long run are actually more efficient as well as more satisfying.

The managers who recognize coaching as an especially useful skill need to get coaching for themselves, so they will experience it and internalize it, and so be able to demonstrate the requisite skills for their direct reports.

Respondent comments about walking the talk

- I model not blaming or fault-finding—rather, I have them reprioritize and find new resources. I validate that it is okay to feel overwhelmed and, when they are, to come and talk to me about it. —Melody Silberstein, Vice President of Human Resources, Woodruff-Sawyer Insurance Services, Inc.
- Some managers resist coaching because they think it is going to take a lot of time and energy. In actuality, it saves time and builds better relationships. —Amy Finch, General Counsel, IASCO
- In today's world, I think people are so inundated with information that it impacts the time available for coaching; however, it is important work. An increasing awareness of the importance of coaching is changing the way we manage. Raising the consciousness and focus of direct reports evokes confidence—and high performance is the result. —Pete Przybylinski, Vice President of Sales, Duckhorn Wine Company

- The skill sets that managers need to coach direct reports include excellent communication: clarity, a high level of emotional intelligence, the ability to read people, and to be able to respond in a way that removes barriers so that people can create a win-win situation. I think managers need to be really good at reading people, and be aware of the impact they are having, help direct reports break the situation down into clear steps that are concrete, and make something intangible into something that is tangible and solid. This is a collaborative process. —*Lee Langhammer Law, Vice President and Publisher, Davies-Black Publishing*
- Coaching must be modeled from the top. Top leaders need to use coaching skills that filter through their culture. There need to be clear coaching goals and expectations where managers are rewarded for using their coaching skills. These concepts are exciting. If all corporations would implement them, it would change the way America works—for the better. —*Andrea Salvemini, Regional Director of Sales, Dynasplint, Inc.*

Seven guidelines
for effective
coaching,
continued

While we interviewed each person individually, there was a strong concurrence that managers who learn and use coaching skills are more effective. Andrea Salvemini, Regional Director of Sales for Dynasplint, stated,

There's a huge need for training to teach managers how to coach. I don't think most companies understand the value of coaching as much as they need to. This training needs to be ongoing and build on itself over time in order to build the requisite skill in managers.

This view was echoed by many of the managers who participated in our research. The exciting thing is that the skills of coaching can be learned and implemented easily by any manager who wants to be more effective. As Jeff Hayes, Co-President of CPP said,

It takes commitment to yourself and to your direct reports to coach well. The rewards of doing so are tremendous to the organization. It's more than worth it to take the time to learn how to coach—and then to do it consistently. When you coach, anything becomes achievable because you develop the highest performing team you could have.

Coaching skills
help to improve
management

Coaching is an interactive process that helps employees and organizations develop more rapidly and produce more satisfying results. When properly coached, direct reports set better goals, take more action, make better decisions, and will more fully use their native strengths. The thirty high-level managers that we interviewed were very clear that there are at least seven coaching skills that help move people to higher levels of managing. In conclusion, we repeat the following seven skills:

- Ask high-impact questions that draw out the highest and best thinking in your direct reports to help them develop their own answers and move them to action.
- When coaching, focus upon what is working, rather than trying to fix problems.
- Stay focused on the result you want. Have the direct report define what success looks like, feels like, and sounds like.
- Build rapport and trust.
- Hold your direct reports accountable. You get what you expect.
- Listen deeply with your eyes, ears, and heart. Be fully present. Turn off your cell phone, hold your calls, and close your door.
- Model what you desire from your direct reports. Walk your talk.

And please keep in mind that these are absolutely learnable skills that are taught by a variety of coach training organizations.

Conclusion

**Author
information**

Tim Hallbom is director of the NLP and Coaching Institute of California and an internationally recognized coach. He is also a trainer and developer in the field of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP), and co-author of *Beliefs: Pathways to Health and Well-Being*, and *NLP: The New Technology of Achievement*.

In addition to providing thousands of contact hours of communication and behavioral change related training to individuals, businesses, and government organizations throughout the United States, Europe, Latin America, Australia, and Asia, Tim has also done extensive research in the areas of financial prosperity and personal productivity. For more information, please see the website: <http://www.nlpca.com>.

Ashley Warrenton-Smith is the President and Founder of Catalyst Coaching and Training. Catalyst specializes in leadership coaching, training, and organizational development, and has offices in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Seattle.

She has been an executive coach focused on assisting corporate leaders in their personal and professional development for the past twenty years, using a blend of various modalities including Inquiry, Neuro-Linguistic Programming, and Thought Pattern Management. In addition to executive coaching, she maintains a private coaching practice in Novato, California, for individuals who want to gain clarity regarding their dreams and create a pathway to achieving them. For more information, please see the website: <http://www.Catalyst-Global.com>.



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