



What Coaching Is All About: Its Place in Management

EXCERPTED FROM

Coaching and Mentoring:

How to Develop Top Talent and Achieve Stronger Performance

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What Coaching Is All About

Its Place in Management

Key Topics Covered in This Chapter

- *A definition of coaching*
- *The benefits of coaching for managers and their employees*
- *Coaching as a four-step process*

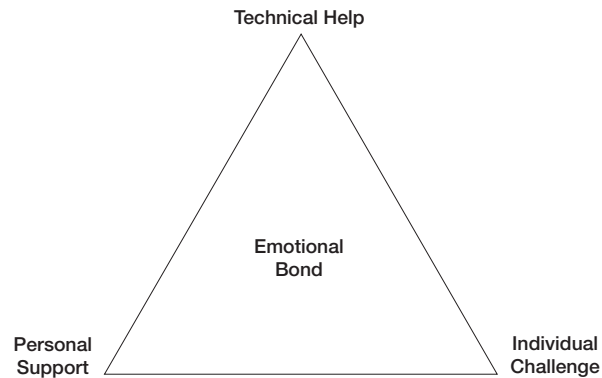
A MANAGER'S JOB is to get results through people and other resources. And with so many industries becoming more reliant on knowledge and service, people and their skills and performance are a top managerial concern. Companies have a huge interest in the capabilities of their employees, which they attempt to develop through formal and on-the-job training and progressive job assignments. They also expect managers and supervisors to develop employee capacity through coaching. What is coaching? *Coaching* is an interactive process through which managers and supervisors aim to solve performance problems or develop employee capabilities. The process relies on collaboration and is based on three components: technical help, personal support, and individual challenge. As described in figure 1-1, these three coaching elements are held together by an emotional bond between the manager/coach and the subordinate/coachee. Because coaching is a person-to-person experience, this sort of bond must be present—and it must be positive if coaching is to succeed.

This chapter explains the benefits of coaching. It will help you identify the people who need it. And it will introduce a four-step process for doing it right.

Benefits

If you are a manager, you're probably wondering why you should become a coach. You already have plenty to do and rarely enough time to do it all. If you are like most managers, your day is consumed

FIGURE 1-1

The Elements of Successful Coaching

Source: Susan Alvey, with permission.

by planning, organizing people around projects, dealing with a budget, solving problems, diffusing conflict, sitting through back-to-back meetings, and on and on. So, why coach, given the time and effort involved? The answer is that effective coaching will actually make your job easier and enhance your career by:

- **Overcoming performance problems.** Chances are that you have one or more subordinates who cannot handle the tasks you assign to them. One submits written reports that are chronically disorganized. Another doesn't know how to budget her time. Yet another never contributes anything to weekly staff meetings. Each of these shortcomings makes your job more difficult. Coaching can often solve them.
- **Developing employee skills.** Coaching is a means for developing new skills among employees. Employees with more skills can, in turn, take on some of the routine tasks that currently eat up your time. Your ability to delegate those tasks will give you more time to think, plan, and to motivate others.
- **Increasing productivity.** Impart greater know-how and effectiveness through coaching and people will work smarter. Your

unit's performance will improve, and so will your standing in the company.

- **Creating promotable subordinates.** Your own career prospects are determined to some extent by how well you develop the human resources under your command. Are you known as a manager who prepares people for more important roles within the company? Acquire that type of reputation and your star will rise. Also, preparing subordinates to take on large roles will increase your own likelihood of advancement. You will be able to move up because you've developed someone capable of stepping into your shoes.
- **Improving retention.** Are you spending too much of your time interviewing and hiring replacements? Coaching can help by reducing turnover—especially among the people you most want to retain. Why is that? People are more loyal and motivated when their boss takes the time to help them improve their skills. Being a voluntary and collaborative activity, coaching also builds trust between managers and subordinates. And trust translates into greater loyalty.
- **Fostering a positive work culture.** Good coaching produces greater job satisfaction and higher motivation. It may also improve your working relationship with subordinates, making your job as manager much easier.

What's good for you is also good for employees who receive effective coaching. Coaching can help subordinates to rekindle motivation, overcome performance problems, develop their strengths and new skills, and prepare themselves for higher-level jobs.

Identifying Coaching Opportunities

Every situation presents opportunities for coaching. Consider these:

- Jean, a newly appointed supervisor, is overbearing in her dealings with subordinates. Because she lacks supervisory experience, she

believes that this approach is the only way to get people to do their jobs.

- Herb is a very accomplished market researcher. His technical skills are superb. But he has few organizational skills and would much rather spend his time at his computer than in meetings with market planners and new product developers. As a result, his valuable findings are not always incorporated into company plans—and his career is going nowhere.
- Claudia has managerial potential. She's a fast learner, works well with other people, and understands the company's goals. You'd like to move her to a higher level, but she isn't quite ready. The one thing that's holding her back is her reluctance to confront difficult and argumentative people. Her upward mobility is checked by this weakness.
- Like other managers, Tim never has enough time to think or plan. "If I could delegate some of my routine chores to Maureen," he tells himself, "I could spend more time on planning." Maureen is a smart and hard worker, but she needs to acquire a few more skills to perform the tasks Tim would like to delegate to her.

Each of these hypothetical situations has something in common: they could probably be improved through coaching. Jean, the "bossy" new supervisor, could be shown that there are other, better ways to get results through people. Herb's genius for market research is underutilized because he doesn't interact with the people who could benefit from his work; he needs to learn some organizational skills. Claudia, too, could be making a larger contribution to her company if she had some pointers and encouragement in confronting difficult people. Finally, Tim, the time-pressed manager, would make his own job easier if he coached Maureen to the point where he could delegate some tasks to her.

Do you observe coaching opportunities like these? Are you letting opportunities to improve performance through coaching slip by? Answer these questions by making a list of all the people you currently deal with who would benefit from effective coaching. Then

prioritize the list to identify the three greatest opportunities. Now imagine how much easier your job would be if these people could solve their problems or improve their performance through coaching.

Chances are that every one of your direct reports could benefit from coaching in some way. Your position and experience have given you a mastery of tasks with which others may be struggling. For example, Shirley, the person you recently promoted to supervisor, isn't delegating enough tasks to her subordinates; she's trying to do everything herself. As an experienced manager, you know the importance of delegating and how to do it. You've been honing the art for years, and you could give Shirley some practical tips. Meanwhile, Carlos, one of your other direct reports, is frustrated in his role as leader of the sale support team—a job to which you appointed him several months ago. "Our meetings never seem to produce results," he complains. "People talk and talk and then break for lunch. We never accomplish anything." As an experienced meeting leader, you could help Carlos make his meetings more productive.

Yes, you have plenty of knowledge to share with others—know-how that can improve their performance. But you don't have all the time in the world for sharing it. So target your coaching to situations that most demand it—where you will get the highest return on your commitment of time and effort. These situations generally arise when

- a new subordinate needs direction;
- a direct report is almost ready for new responsibilities and just needs a bit more help; and
- a problem performer could be brought up to an acceptable level of work if he had some guidance

Do you have subordinates like these?

Use Performance Appraisal to Guide Your Coaching

Performance appraisal is often the best instrument for identifying important coaching opportunities. *Performance appraisal* is a formal method used by many companies to assess how well people are

doing with respect to their assigned goals. Such an appraisal is generally conducted annually, with follow-ups as needed. Like the physical exam administered by your doctor, this annual checkup gives a manager and the company an opportunity to spot problems before they become chronic. It also helps employees and managers focus on the goals and performance expectations that impact salary, merit pay increases, and result in promotions. Appraisal sessions are both a confirmation and a formalization of the ongoing feedback that should be part of every manager-subordinate relationship.

If a performance appraisal identifies a correctable problem, the manager and subordinate should agree on a plan for eliminating it. Coaching is often part of the plan. The performance appraisal is also used to identify the skills, knowledge, and/or experiences that good employees need to acquire as a condition of moving up a rung on the career ladder. Here again, coaching is often essential to the plan.

Busy managers are not particularly fond of performance appraisals. First, few managers enjoy telling people to their faces that they're not doing their jobs as well as they should. Second, giving performance appraisals to each of many direct reports consumes time, and time is every manager's scarcest asset. Nevertheless, when approached with the right frame of mind and done well, performance appraisal is worth the effort.

Note: If you are unfamiliar with performance appraisals and how to make the most of them, turn to the Appendix A, where you will find an eight-step primer for doing it well.

Intervene Early

Many of your coaching situations will involve personal behaviors or performance problems that you'd rather avoid. One person cannot or will not collaborate with others, or another dominates her team to the point that others are unable to contribute. Yet another is repeatedly late for work. It's always easier to avoid problems like these than to engage with them. If the behavior stems from a personality problem—such as the person who obsessively tries to dominate group activities—few managers will relish the idea of tackling it.

They are managers, after all, not psychologists. Other problems, such as chronic tardiness, may originate in a dysfunctional family situation. Again, few managers want to take on people's personal troubles. Yet correcting problems that reduce performance is part of the manager's job, and doing so is always easier when the intervention is made early. So don't allow bad behavior or performance problems to fester. They won't get better by themselves.

A Four-Step Process

Coaching is generally accomplished through a four-step process of observation, discussion, active coaching, and follow-up. We'll outline these briefly here, and examine them in detail in subsequent chapters.

Step 1: Preparation. The first step in effective coaching is observation. Whether your coaching is done on the spot or at scheduled times and places, you should not do anything until you understand the situation, the person, and the person's current skills. The best way to gain that understanding is through direct observation. Your goal should be to identify the person's strengths and weaknesses and to understand the impact that his behavior is having on coworkers and on his ability to achieve goals.

Step 2: Discussion. This step begins with careful preparation. As you prepare, be very clear about the purpose of the discussion, the issues you think are important, and the consequences of not addressing these issues. A prepared coach is a better coach. Once you're prepared, you are ready to engage your subordinate in a dialogue that shares strategies for overcoming performance problems and building skills.

Discussion, in many instances, should lead to a coaching plan on which both parties agree. Bringing performance up to standard within a certain time or risking dismissal is one clear example. A plan assures systematic attention to performance improvement.

Step 3: Active Coaching. Once you understand the person and the situation and you have a plan, coaching sessions should begin. An effective coach offers ideas and advice in such a way that the subordinate can hear them, respond to them, and appreciate their value. Giving and receiving feedback is a critical part of active coaching—and of supervision in general.

Step 4: Follow-Up. Effective coaching includes follow-up that monitors progress. Follow-up helps individuals stay on an improvement trajectory. If they are getting off track, follow-up is your opportunity to get them back on course. Follow-up might include asking what is going well and what is not. “Are you getting stuck?” Follow-up sessions are also opportunities for praising progress and for seeking opportunities for continued coaching and feedback. If the action plan needs modification, the follow-up meeting is the place to do it.

If you’re a new manager, or new to coaching, your first efforts may feel uncomfortable and may not be entirely effective. Just remember that you will get better with practice.

Summing Up

- Coaching is an interactive process through which managers and supervisors aim to accomplish one of two things: (1) to solve performance problems, or (2) develop employee capabilities.
- Coaching can help to increase productivity, make subordinates more promotable, and improve retention.
- Performance appraisal often reveals opportunities for coaching.
- Coaching is generally accomplished through a four-step process of observation, discussion, active coaching, and follow-up.

The Eight Steps of Performance Appraisal

There is no one “right way” to conduct performance appraisal. Every company has a set of suggested procedures, and every subordinate presents a different challenge to the appraising manager. Still, effective practice generally involves the following eight steps, addressed in this order.

STEP 1: BE PREPARED Like every activity, performance appraisal benefits from preparation—by both employee and managers. Little can be accomplished if either manager or employee—or both—strolls into an appraisal meeting without having reflected on what has happened during the preceding months.

Let’s consider the employee first. It is important to involve an employee in every stage of the appraisal process so that both sides of the story are on the table. One of the best ways of doing this is to have the employee complete a self-appraisal. In many cases, the human resource department provides a checklist for this purpose. That checklist states the employee’s goals and the job behaviors and functions associated with them. (Note: Those goals should have been established with the employee at the very beginning of the appraisal period.)

In self-appraisal, the employee evaluates his or her performance against goals. If your human resource department doesn’t provide a checklist, here are a few questions you should ask the employee to address in a self-appraisal:

- To what extent did you achieve your goals?
- Which, if any, goals have you exceeded?
- Are there particular goals with which you are currently struggling?
- What is inhibiting your progress toward these goals: lack of training, resources, direction from management, other matters?

Self-appraisal has two key benefits. First, it gets the person being evaluated involved. That involvement sets a tone of partnership for the appraisal process and makes the employee more open to subsequent feedback by the manager. Second, it gives the manager a different perspective on the subordinate's work and any related problems.

STEP 2: CONDUCT THE PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL MEETING

Many people are anxious about performance appraisal meetings. So create a tone of partnership from the very beginning. Start by setting the person at ease; don't let him feel that he is in the prisoner's dock. Then review the purpose of the appraisal and its positive benefits for both parties. This will psychologically prepare you and the employee and will act as a "warm-up" for dialogue.

Then ask the employee to talk about his self-appraisal. This will help you understand the employee's point of view and prevent you from controlling too much of the conversation. Listen very carefully to what the person is saying. Don't interrupt until the person has had his say. Demonstrate that you are listening by repeating what you've heard: "If I am understanding you correctly, you feel that you are meeting all goals with respect to the weekly sales reports, but that you're struggling to contact all the key customers you've been assigned. Do I have that right?"

Once the employee has laid all of his cards on the table, move on to your appraisal.

STEP 3: IDENTIFY PERFORMANCE GAPS As you disclose your appraisal, give priority to how the employee's accomplishments compare to agreed-upon goals. For example, if Joan says that her

greatest achievement was organizing and chairing a meeting between key customers and your R&D personnel, ask yourself, “Was this one of her goals?” If it was, how close did that performance come to meeting the metrics of that goal? How did she do relative to her other goals? Look for gaps between actual and expected performance. Your big problem here may be that some performance is difficult to quantify. For example, if a hotel manager has given his desk personnel the goal of creating a welcoming environment for guests, how would he measure their performance?

If your appraisal has found a “gap” between the employee’s goal and actual performance, make this the focus of your discussion and feedback. As a starting point, identify a larger organizational goal to explain how the employee’s goal supports it. People can and do change when they understand the consequences of their behavior and work. For example, you might say:

Our department’s goal is to resolve all customer warranty problems within one week. That’s our contribution to the company’s higher goal of creating customer satisfaction and loyalty—both of which guarantee our future employment and bonuses. We can’t accomplish that if any team member fails to handle his or her share of customer complaints. Do you see how what we are doing fits in?

Make sure the employee affirms your statement. Then move the conversation toward identifying the root cause of substandard performance. “If you’re falling short of your goal, why do you think that is?” Listen carefully to the response; give your employee the first opportunity to identify the root cause. If you don’t hear a thoughtful reply, probe with other questions: “Could the problem be that you need more training? Are there too many distractions in the office?”

STEP 4: FIND THE ROOT CAUSES OF PERFORMANCE GAPS

Identifying the root causes of performance gaps will, in most cases, create an atmosphere of objectivity in which both you and your subordinate can contribute in positive ways. You won’t be attacking the subordinate, and he won’t be defending himself from your criticism. Instead, you’ll be working together to address “the problem,” which

in most cases is *outside* the subordinate (e.g., lack of proper training, too few resources, the workplace environment, etc.) The following suggestions can help you offer more useful feedback:

- Encourage the employee to articulate points of disagreement.
- Avoid generalizations such as, “You just don’t seem involved with your work,” in favor of specific comments that relate to the job, such as, “I have noticed that you haven’t offered any suggestions at our service improvement meetings. Why is that?”
- Be selective. You don’t need to recite every shortcoming or failing. Stick to the issues that really matter.
- Give authentic praise as well as meaningful criticism.
- Orient feedback toward problem solving and action.

(Note: For a handy checklist for planning a feedback session, see Appendix B. You can download free copies of the same checklist and other tools used in the Harvard Business Essentials series from the series Web site: www.elearning.hbsp.org/businessstools.)

STEP 5: PLAN TO CLOSE PERFORMANCE GAPS Once you’ve identified performance gaps and discussed their root causes, make sure that the employee acknowledges them and recognizes their importance. Once that is done, begin a dialogue about their resolution.

Give the employee the first opportunity to develop a plan to close any gaps. Say something like, “What would you propose as a solution?” Putting the ball in the employee’s court will make that person more responsible for the solution and, hopefully, more committed to it. As the employee describes his or her plan to close any gaps, challenge assumptions and offer ideas for strengthening that plan. If the employee cannot put a credible plan together, you’ll have to take a more active approach. In either case, seek agreement and commitment from the employee to the plan. A good plan includes

- specific goals;
- a timeline;

- action steps;
- expected outcomes; and
- training or practice required, if applicable.

The development plan should become part of the employee's record.

If you cannot settle the matter of closing performance gaps during your appraisal meeting, establish a time and place for a follow-up meeting, and explain its purpose. "Over the next week I'd like you to think about the things we've discussed today. I'll do the same. We'll then meet again and develop a plan for getting the help you need to handle these problems."

Before concluding the meeting, conduct a brief review of what was said and what agreements were made.

STEP 6: REEXAMINE PERFORMANCE GOALS Since an entire year may have passed since their last performance appraisals, reexamine the goals toward which your subordinates are expected to work. This is especially important when the organization is in a state of change, or when a subordinate is on a rapid trajectory of workplace mastery.

Involve the employee in the goal-changing process to be sure that (1) she has the capacity to assume new goals, and (2) she understands the details and the importance of these goals.

In all cases be very clear about the new goals and how performance will be measured against them. Also, depending on the employee's skills, this is the time to create a development plan (coaching, training, etc.) for giving the employee the capability required to meet the new goals.

STEP 7: GET IT ON THE RECORD It's very important to document your meeting, its key points, and its outcomes. That means that you'll need to take rough notes during the meeting and complete them immediately afterward, when your memory is still fresh. Make a record of

- the date;

- key points and phrases used by the employee (not necessarily verbatim), including his or her self-appraisal;
- key points and phrases used by you;
- points of disagreement, if any;
- a summary of the development plan;
- agreed-upon next steps; and
- performance goals for the coming year.

Chances are that your company will require that copies of this record be provided to the employee, to the employee's human resource file, and to your files. In most cases, both the manager and the employee are asked to sign the performance appraisal report, and the employee has a legal right to append his or her own comments to the report.

STEP 8: FOLLOW UP You should plan on following up every appraisal meeting. The high performers and satisfactory performers will obviously need less follow-up. However, if you've given them new, more demanding goals, you'll want to monitor their progress and determine if they need added training, coaching, or support.

Tips for Effective Appraisal

- Make the employee feel that he or she is part of the process.
- Provide honest feedback to the employees.
- Cover the full spectrum of the employee's job responsibilities in terms of what was done right and what was done wrong.
- Make it balanced: neither a lovefest nor total criticism.
- Identify what should be done in terms of employee development.

Employees with performance gaps who have committed to development plans should be more carefully monitored. That monitoring could take the form of a follow-up meeting every few weeks or months. Here, your goal will be to check for progress against development plans. These meetings represent opportunities for coaching and encouragement from you.

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