Coaching for better results: key practices of high performance leaders

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the issue of workplace coaching and offers insight into the various coaching practices that are necessary to produce better employee performance and results.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper reports on a survey of 219 experienced managers who were asked to respond to a series of questions on the subject of coaching on a four point strongly agree to strongly disagree scale and references previous research in the discussion.

Findings – Key findings include that participant managers consider: coaching to be critical to their success and the success of their employees; coaching requires individualized strategies based on the employee's ability and motivation; employees do not always receive the coaching they want and need; and managers believe that they have considerable room for development in this critical leadership practice.

Research limitations/implications – The primary limitation of this descriptive study is the use of a targeted convenience sample which might restrict the generalizability of these findings.

Practical implications – Implications of this research include: organizations placing greater effort in assisting managers to develop their coaching talents; managers tailor-making coaching strategies for individual employees; and creating a better understanding of the factors that drive employee performance and what managers can and should do to impact these factors.

Originality/value – This paper moves away from the concept of "generic" coaching and makes a very strong case for "individualized approaches" to employee coaching and for managers to give coaching greater time and priority on a daily basis as leaders.

Keywords Coaching, Leaders, Leadership development, Performance levels

Paper type Research paper

> Lots of businesses and leaders talk about the importance of coaching but in the end the real question is do they do it, do they do it well, do they regularly and do they do it based on the needs of different employees? . . . It isn't just about providing performance feedback, it is about helping and supporting employees reach their full potential (Senior Manager).

For the past decade we have been studying the practices of high performance business leaders around the world and have found that for a manager to produce sustainable long-term results, they must demonstrate real skill at coaching the people who report to them. We have learned that successful leaders use ongoing coaching and performance feedback as a tool to elevate the performance of their people (Longenecker and Simonetti, 2001). In fact, we have gone so far as to develop an irrefutable performance principle on the issue of coaching:

> Employees cannot improve their performance if they don't know there is a need to do so, if they don't know what to change, if they don't know how to change or if they lack the proper support and reinforcement for effective performance.

The implications of this statement make a very strong case for leadership training and development in this area and should encourage managers to take proactive steps to

develop this critical leadership skill. At the same time, we have found that employees, regardless of position or level in an organization, need effective coaching following *any* training and development experience if the individual is going to implement and perfect the desired skills and their organizations are going to get a return on their investment (Longenecker and Neubert, 2005).

The word "coach" can have a variety of meanings, especially to those who have worked in demanding organizations or played organized sports. Coach can mean "authoritarian" or "the order-giver" or "the person who calls the shots" or "disciplinarian". But on a more positive note, it can also mean, "encourager" or "counselor" or "mentor" or "guide." While the word "coach" can mean many different things to many people, our research strongly suggests that *a coach is an individual who is in a position to provide feedback, counsel and accountability to another individual with the purpose of helping them improve their performance and develop their talents* (Longenecker, 2007b). Becoming a real and effective coach is a challenging proposition for most business leaders. This is because many managers have never been trained in effective coaching practices and very few managers have coaches to help coach them on how to become better coaches (Kets de Vries *et al.*, 2007). The purpose of this article is to share the findings of a recent research study on the importance of effective coaching and to offer the reader recommendations on how to better coach their people using a framework that has emerged from a over decade of research on the coaching practices of high performance business leaders.

A study on leaders and coaching

To explore the practice of coaching in today's ultra-competitive workplace, a sample of 219 managers was surveyed and asked to respond to a series of questions on the subject to help us better understand their experience with the subject. These managers were part of a large educational program and represented over 50 different US manufacturing and service organizations. Participants had an average age of 43.5 years, were 63 percent male and 37 percent female, had 12.8 years of managerial experience and represented over eight different functional business disciplines.

In one portion of the study, participants were asked to respond to a series of statements on coaching using a four-point rating scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". The responses were analyzed and a number of noteworthy findings that carry important implications for the practice of coaching are listed below:

- 82 percent of managers agree that coaching is critically important to a manager's success;
- 68 percent of managers stated that knowing their people was critically important to their effectiveness as a coach;
- 93 percent of managers agree that employees want and need feedback and coaching to improve their performance;
- 74 percent of managers stated that they believed most employees do not get enough feedback and coaching on how to improve their performance;
- 69 percent of managers believe that a manager should adjust their approach to coaching to meet the performance needs of individual employees;
- 78 percent of managers believe an employee's ability and motivation should influence a manager's approach to coaching an individual employee;
- 43 percent of managers believe that other managers are effective in their role as a coach; and
- 66 percent of managers stated that they struggled to make time for coaching on an ongoing basis; and
- 80 percent of managers believe that they could improve their coaching skills.

These findings strongly suggest that:

- managers truly realize the importance of coaching;
- managers believe that their employees want and need coaching;
- managers they should adjust their coaching style based upon the individual employee; and
- an employee's ability and motivation are key factors in the practice of effective coaching.

In addition, managers made it clear that they believe a large percentage of managers are not effective coaches, managers struggle to find the time to make coaching a priority and study participants believe that coaching is an area that needs development for a large percentage of managers. In summary, the business leader participants of this study make a very strong case that coaching is a critical practice for their success, employees want and need the feedback and guidance created by this practice, and there is real room for improvement and development in this regard. With this backdrop let us share what managers can and should do to become better coaches in their quest to competitive advantage with and through people.

Recommendations for better coaching

Before offer recommendations on what managers can and should do to become better coaches, let us start by reviewing what the human performance equation that can be used as a valuable coaching tool:

$$performance = ability \times motivation \times support.$$

Anyone's performance can be viewed as a function of this critical equation and is central to the practice of effective coaching. *Ability* is the employee's skills and talents in effectively performing their job. *Motivation* is the employee's level of inner drive and work ethic in performing their job. *Support* is providing the employee with the information, tools, and the resources necessary to perform their job. We will use this performance equation as a framework for recommending how managers might address the critical issues identified in the research findings cited above with a better approach to coaching their people.

No. 1: A coach must know their people

To use the performance equation effectively as a coaching tool requires managers to know their people. While managers are frequently told to keep a "professional distance" between themselves and their direct reports, when taken to an extreme this can cause managers to *not* understand what makes their people tick or their talents and shortcomings. To coach any employee effectively , a manager must know and understand the employee's work ethic and level of motivation. At the same time, the manager must have a strong grasp of the employee's abilities, skills, and talents. There is no substitute for having a clear understanding of each and every employee on these two critically important factors, which is the starting point for being an effective coach. Without this knowledge, a manager cannot provide useful and meaningful coaching to a given employee. To acquire this knowledge requires regular communications, interaction, and observation to learn what causes an employee to perform the way that they do. There is no substitute for this type of relationship-based knowledge for the coaching process to be both meaningful and effective (Kilburg, 2000).

"... many managers have never been trained in effective coaching practices ... "

No. 2. A coach must monitor each employee's performance

Most managers are exceptionally busy these days as they deal with the competitive pressures of the global marketplace. Meetings, e-mails, phone calls, paperwork, and all forms of report writing can consume a disproportionate amount of a manager's work day. Results-oriented managers acknowledge this challenge but make it a top priority to monitor each of their employee's performance on a regular basis. Without accurate and up-to-date information on an employee's contribution to the organization, coaching can become guesswork, ill-informed, and similar to "shooting in the dark". Effective coaches take the time to track an employee's performance so that they are in a position to coach the employee and provide effective feedback based on their actual performance. It is critically important for a manager to maintain observation of both individual and work unit performance through effective and ongoing interpersonal contact. At the same time, a manager must review performance data on a regular basis and must know what is really going on around them to be an effective coach. An ill-informed coach is an equation for a myriad of performance problems that are difficult to address without accurate information.

No. 3. Effective coaches ensure their people have the proper support to perform

While it is a coach's job to monitor all three dimensions of the performance equation, effective coaches start by ensuring that their employees are properly supported so that they can perform effectively. An effective leader will ensure that their employees have the equipment, tools, information, supplies, authority and/or sanction they need to get the job done. All of these factors set the stage for employee performance and are the primary responsibility of any manager who is serious about improving the performance of their employees. Starting here is critical; because it tells employees that their leader is willing to equip them for success as they approach their work and sends a message that the manager is serious about the success of the employee. Equipping people to succeed just might be a coach's most important job that is not always given the attention that it deserves.

No. 4. Effective coaches coach employees based on their ability and motivation

After reviewing the issue of providing effective support, effective coaches take time to assess the issues of ability and motivation with each employee. The findings of this research study make clear that good coaches do this individually because people are like locks – each of them has a different key for unlocking personal performance and this is especially true on the dimensions of ability and motivation (Longenecker and Stansfield, 2000). Many managers only coach employees when there is a problem or performance deficiency but this philosophy doesn't maximize the performance of all employees. Managers who are serious about improving the performance of their employees provide coaching with *all* of their employees by addressing the issues of ability and motivation on an ongoing, systematic basis. Figure 1 provides a framework for viewing four different roles of a coach driven by the level of ability and motivation of the various types of employees that managers encounter.

Based on the ability and motivation coaching matrix illustrated in Figure 1, here are the four categories of coaching that have emerged from our research in leading different types of employees.

Category 1: Coach as nurturer – leading the "dream" employee

Dream employees are highly skilled and highly motivated and are a manager's best asset for getting results. They typically do what is expected, and then more. They are self-starting, self-motivated, and frequently willing to take on additional work. This type of employee likes to learn and take on new challenges. These are "dream employees" and critically important to a managers success. It is easy for managers to assume that these individuals do not need attention or input, but they must not be taken for granted or ignored, because doing so can de-motivate them. In this type of situation, a coach's role is that of a *nurturing leader* who helps keep performance strong by:

- identifying new and challenging job assignments;
- providing regular doses of praise and recognition;

Figure 1 The employee ability and motivation coaching matrix

		Category 3	Category 1
	High	**COACH AS MOTIVATOR**	**COACH AS NURTURER**
		High ability	High ability
		Low motivation	High motivation
		The "Underachieving" Employee	*The "Dream" Employee*
Employee Ability		Category 4	Category 2
	Low	**COACH AS MIRACLE WORKER**	**COACH AS TRAINER**
		Low ability	Low ability
		Low motivation	High motivation
		The "Change-or-Go" Employee	*The "Up-and-Coming" Employee*
		Low	High

Employee Motivation

- offering additional training and development opportunities;

- providing additional responsibility, empowerment and authority; and

- letting the employee know, in creative and meaningful ways, that they are truly respected, needed and appreciated.

Nurturing dream employees can be a critical coaching activity to help retain these individuals and keep them performing to the best of their capacity. Managers must give these employees the coaching and nurturing that they need to feel appreciated and to help them grow and develop into even better performers.

Category 2: Coach as trainer – leading the "up-and-coming" employee

Up-and-coming employees can be a blessing to a manager because they are motivated and willing to work hard and learn even though they presently lack specific skills and talents that hamper their overall performance. Up-and-comers can be new hires, transfers, contract employees, or employees in cross-training roles. In addition, with the infusion of large-scale change and technology into most workplaces it is not uncommon to find numerous employees in this coaching category. These employees need their manager to be a *training coach* and can be helped when their leader shows them how to improve their ability and skills. Employees in this category are generally very willing students because they are highly motivated. An effective coach in this category:

- observes and monitors employee performance and identifies the specific skills that need to be developed for improvement;

- helps the employee develop a training plan to assist the employee acquire the skills and provides the resources necessary to do so sooner rather than later;

- supports the employee in their efforts to acquire these skills by providing additional on-the-job training, formal training, and cross-training opportunities;

- provides specific instructions to aid skill acquisition and regularly answers employee questions that emerge in the development process; and

- provides ongoing and specific feedback and reinforcement to employees as they work in applying newly acquired skills on the job.

The intrinsic motivation of employees in this category means that they are likely to be willing students and people who truly *want* to learn and develop their skills. Coaching employees who need to improve their ability is all about identifying the employees' "skill gap" and developing a plan of action designed to help the individual develop these talents as quickly as possible. Coaching these types of employees requires planning, patience and follow-up but can produce a significant increase in performance by tapping into and channeling an employee's reservoir of motivation to learn and develop.

Category 3: Coach as motivator – dealing with the "underachieving" employee

Underachieving employees frequently have the skill, expertise, and ability to do good work when they want to, but their motivation, or lack thereof, tends to get in the way. Employees in this category frequently have negative attitudes, a poor work ethic, lack of commitment, and do the bare minimum to get by. These employees are frequently labeled "underachievers" or "people on cruise control" because they fail to use their talents to the fullest on a regular basis. These employees can be strong performers on any given day but they do not perform at a consistently high level. These employees may not want but need a *coach who is a motivator* to fire up their willingness to work and to clarify the consequences of failing to do so. For these employees, the coach's primary role is to motivate and increase their ownership of performance and their accountability for desired results. Coaches in this category must:

- clearly establish performance goals and standards for these employees that represents a value-added performance threshold;

- closely track and monitor employee performance to create a strong sense of accountability for their performance;

- make of both positive feedback and reinforcement to recognize effective performance;

- use constructive criticism, reprimands, and negative consequences in responding to these employees to remove undesirable behaviors; and

- be willing to demote or terminate an employee in this category who only performs well when they choose to do so or are under scrutiny.

These coaching practices help the employee improve consistency and their overall performance that is affected by their motivation. With so many managers under inordinate pressure to improve performance, most managers can ill-afford to allow this type of under-performer to continue their under-achieving ways for an extended period of time. If these employees do not respond to these types of coaching interventions, they may find themselves falling into the next and most dangerous coaching category.

Category 4: Coach as miracle worker: dealing with the "change-or-go" employee

A worst-case coaching scenario for a manager involves the change-or-go employees: those who lack the ability and skill to do the job *and* don't show any sign of being motivated to improve. These individuals might be bad hires, recent transfers, people who have not changed with the organization, long-term survivors, or hangers-on. In the end they are people who, for whatever reason, lack the ability and willingness to perform at a satisfactory level. Change-or-go employees must do just that: change their performance or be asked to leave the enterprise because of the problems they cause and the damage they do to customers, fellow workers and the bottom line. Coaching a change-or-go employee requires managers to practice the axiom "either change the employee or change the employee." For these employees, a manager's coaching role becomes that of a turnaround artist or *miracle worker.* It is necessary to address simultaneously the issues of both ability and motivation in

> **"Managers must take their roles as coaches seriously and organizations must do their level best to equip and support their managers at all levels in this regard."**

a reasonable time frame – a tall order, at best. Coaching these employees requires the manager to:

- review the employee's employment record with the organization and to track and analyze the employee's actual performance contribution to date;

- ensure that the employee has the proper tools and support that they need to perform their job effectively;

- clearly define the performance changes that must be made for employment to continue;

- work with the employee to create a serious performance improvement/turnaround plan; and

- monitor the employee's performance on a daily basis, providing ongoing feedback and documentation of the employee's contribution to the organization and fulfillment of their improvement plan.

People are capable of these types of turnarounds when they are properly coached and are confronted with the harsh consequences of nonperformance and failure to improve. When clearly established and communicated performance standards are not being met and the employee is not responding to attempts to improve, the coach's role shifts to that of a disciplinarian and documenter of poor performance to prepare for demotion or termination. Although this is often an unpleasant task, taking action demonstrated that performance matters to all concerned parties, which can send a powerful motivational message to everyone in the organization and can help reinforce the fact that performance really counts in staying employed.

No. 5. Effective coaches develop a coaching strategy for each employee

It is imperative that business leaders review the performance of each employee on a regular basis and develop a strategy to effectively address the employee's current level of performance according to the participants of this research study. Effective coaches periodically assess how they are coaching each every employee in their charge to ensure that they are providing each employee with the proper form of feedback and direction to improve their performance. Most managers are well served when they use The employee ability and motivation coaching matrix to develop a coaching strategy to respond to the needs of each and every employee. This strategy should be used to help each employee develop both the ability and motivation so as to increase the likelihood of better performance. It is important to note that managers need to fight the temptation of "generic coaching", which is to treat all employees the same in terms of how they provide feedback and guidance through their leadership actions. The performance equation makes it clear that employees have different needs that must be met by the specific actions of their manager if they are to realize their full potential.

No. 6. Effective coaches take the time to coach

According to the participants in our study, most managers struggle to find the time to coach their people and to provide them with the feedback they truly need. Having said this, most managers are under increasing pressure to improve performance which is hard, if not impossible, to achieve without a motivated, talented and properly supported workforce. Budgeting and scheduling regular time on a weekly basis to interact with and coach

employees is a key practice in the lives of most high performance business leaders. While managers are frequently overwhelmed with e-mails, meetings, phone calls and such, a true cost benefit analysis of how a manager spends his or her time will reveal that coaching is clearly worth the time when compared to other managerial activities. Developing this practice simply requires the commitment and discipline needed to execute any important business initiative and a manager's dedication of time in a key component in this process. In addition, the managers in this study made it clear that coaching is critical to their success and to the success of their people: this requires the appropriate application of the time resource.

No. 7. Effective coaches develop themselves to meet the demands of the job

In this study, a full 80 percent of participants believed that they could improve their coaching skills. Our research on high performance business leaders makes it clear that successful managers develop themselves to meet the demands of their jobs of which coaching is a key component (Longenecker, 2007a). If a manager is not the coach that they feel they need to be they are well served to develop a plan of action to acquire the requisite knowledge, skills, and behaviors. A myriad of resources exist assist to help managers in this regard including on-line coaching courses, formal training programs, books, articles, and mentoring programs that can become part of a mangers development plan. While coaching can appear to be a very simplistic practice, the art and nuance of coaching individual employees can and will always be a process that requires skills and real talent.

In closing

When an organization and its leaders take coaching to the next level both organizational and individual performance typically improve (Boyatzis *et al.*, 2006). It has been said that "the urgent is seldom important and the important is seldom urgent" and nowhere is this no true that in the practice of coaching. Managers must take their roles as coaches seriously and organizations must do their level best to equip and support their managers at all levels in this regard. The findings of this study and corresponding discussion highlight a number of things that can and should be done to help improve the quality of coaching in any organization regardless of function, industry or country. In closing, the key components of coaching can be summarized using the acronym "COACH", which can go along way increasing the likely of any manager's long-term success. Remember that coaching requires:

- *concern* for the success of the employee;
- *observation* of ongoing employee behavior and performance;
- *alignment* with the employee's ability and motivation with performance standards;
- *communication* and feedback about performance to help shape and reinforce desired outcomes; and
- *help* to improve employee performance and make employees feel appreciated!

In the end, without effective coaching organizations and their managers will be harder pressed to compete in our global marketplace at a time people can and must be a primary source of competitive advantage!

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