Coaching and Career Development

Coaching and career development are integral parts of every manager’s job. Studies show that managers who provide regular, ongoing coaching and feedback -- to help employees develop skills and improve performance, and define and realize career goals -- have more successful and productive teams. Successful coaches listen well and provide plenty of opportunities for learning and growth. Coaching is one of the best ways to develop and retain valuable employees.

What is coaching?
Experts describe coaching as “on-the-job training.” But it's a very special kind of training. It’s not what a co-worker might do when showing someone how the database is set up. It’s different from managing, too; it’s less about directing the work and more about helping someone succeed. “Coaching,” writes James Flaherty in *Coaching: Evoking Excellence in Others*, “is a way of working with people that leaves them more competent and more fulfilled so that they are more able to contribute to their organizations and find meaning in what they are doing.”

The underlying goal of every coaching interaction is to help the other person succeed. In this chapter we discuss ways to develop your coaching skills as you work with employees to help them develop and succeed. We’ll focus on five key points.

Following are five key ways to coach and support career development

1. **Hold frequent coaching meetings with employees.**
Coaching is about building relationships -- and that takes time. For coaching to work well, it has to happen regularly. It’s important to remember to spend as much time coaching strong employees as weaker ones. Sometimes managers wind up concentrating on the employee who needs remedial attention to the detriment of stronger performers who don’t seem to need any help. That’s a misallocation of managerial resources. You must meet often with all the people you manage -- individually and as a team -- so that you establish trusting relationships. These may be unplanned meetings to discuss a specific problem that has come up on a project or more formal sessions that you schedule ahead of time.
You might hold a coaching session with an employee for any number of reasons, including:

- to build communication skills -- for example, to coach an employee on ways to be more patient with a less experienced co-worker
- to build a specific skill or change a pattern of behavior
- to help someone adapt to a new process or practice
- to improve performance and productivity
- to help an employee overcome a problem
- to improve working relationships

Look, too, for opportunities to coach people in unscheduled, impromptu ways by making yourself available when the occasion arises. Keep in mind that coaching can take place in many ways. You might coach an employee face to face or over the phone if the person works remotely. You might even have a coaching session with someone by e-mail.

2. Work on your coaching skills.
Successful coaches encourage, support, and offer guidance and advice. Above all, they are patient. They are also good, trustworthy listeners. They take a genuine interest in the people they are coaching and ask lots of questions that are tailored to each individual’s particular situation.

Think of the best coaches you have known, whether the person was a sports coach, a debate team coach in high school, or a coach you knew through work. “Great coaches know that one key to achieving outstanding performance is to help individuals focus on what they do best,” writes Glenn Phelps in “Coaching Talent,” in Gallup Management Journal. A successful coach offers ideas and advice, but doesn’t tell the other person what to do.

Here are questions to ask yourself as you look at your own coaching skills:

- Are you a good listener?
- Are you patient with people who know less than you?
- Do you know what each of your direct reports does best? What each needs to focus on?
- Are you interested in seeing people succeed and do even better in their jobs?
- Do you make time regularly for coaching sessions with the people you manage?
- Are you comfortable delivering praise as well as constructive suggestions?
• Are you open to feedback from your direct reports?

**3. Plan and prepare before coaching an employee.**
While a good coaching meeting may feel like an informal give-and-take conversation, in fact, its success rests on the coach having planned and prepared ahead of time. (It’s wise to plan ahead even for an informal coaching conversation.) Here are some ways to prepare:

• *Schedule time for coaching sessions into your calendar.* Set aside time for ongoing coaching and career development conversations.

• *Draw up a list of questions to ask at the coaching session.* Ask questions that are specific and tailored to the particular person and set of circumstances. Open-ended questions are best. Here are some examples of open-ended questions you might ask:
  - How do you think the project is going?
  - What has worked well for you on this project? Why?
  - What obstacles have you had on this project?
  - What support or resources do you feel you need?
  - What do you see as the goal of this project? Has the goal changed since you started?
  - How will we measure the success of this project?
  - What accomplishments can you point to so far? How were those achieved?
  - What do you see as the next steps?
  - What have you learned so far?
  - What skills have you used? What skills do you wish were stronger?

• *Discuss and agree on goals and learning objectives.* You might ask your employee, “What should our goals be for these meetings?”

• *Draw up a plan.* For example, if the plan is to coach an employee on how to use a new database program, have all the tools and information you will need on hand to achieve the plan. This might include a detailed summary of process steps for the person to follow as he or she learns and practices with the new database.

**4. Provide helpful, constructive feedback.**
Constructive and ongoing feedback is what helps people learn and keep on learning. Here are suggestions on giving productive coaching feedback:

• *Start by asking for permission to give feedback.* You might say, “Would you be open to hearing a few suggestions?”

• *Focus on specific ways to improve skills and performance.* Provide feedback on a specific area of concern rather than generalizing. “Effective coaches deliver
constructive feedback in three parts,” writes Max Landsberg in *The Tao of Coaching*. According to Landsberg:

- First, describe specific actions that the employee took. “During your last presentation, you avoided answering a direct question . . . “
- Second, highlight the implications of those actions. “This made the audience feel that you were uncertain about your material and uninterested in their concerns.”
- Third, suggest a desired outcome. “Next time, try to allow time for questions and respond to them clearly.”

- **Focus on people’s strengths, not weaknesses, when giving feedback.** “Instead of seeing the shortcomings of your people as something to be corrected, try viewing them as the flip side of strengths,” writes Martha Craumer in a December 2001 article on coaching in the *Harvard Management Communication Letter*. “What you see as ‘wimpiness,’ for instance, may actually be a heightened sensitivity to others -- and could be very valuable in sales, customer service, or consulting.”

- **Be direct and straightforward when giving honest feedback and coaching.**

- **Always offer feedback with tact and sensitivity.** Focus on the work and on specific issues. Feedback should never be personal. Avoid labels. Instead of saying, “You’re slow,” say, “I’m wondering why it took two weeks to close out the Smith project. We’ll need to close the Jones account in one week. That’s our standard. How can I help you meet it?” Or, “Let’s review your progress on this project. You completed a thorough assessment of the problem and developed a good remedy. However, your follow-up to ensure your ideas were implemented was not as timely or as complete as it needs to be. I have some ideas for how you can avoid this recurring the next time and would like to share them with you.”

- **Give timely feedback.** “Don’t wait two weeks to tell someone about something they did today,” write Shurtleff and McKenzie in their paper “Coaching and Counseling,” published by the American Society for Training & Development. “Coaches don’t put off discussing the game with players.” Don’t wait for an annual performance review to provide coaching and feedback.

- **Make sure the person has understood the feedback.** You might ask, “Is there anything I’ve said that isn’t clear?” or “Was this helpful?”

- **Provide ongoing feedback.** “Coachable moments” occur every day -- moments that offer opportunities for learning. Such moments might occur when an employee is facing a difficult task, is having a conflict with a co-worker, or stops by to talk about a problem. Use these opportunities to listen and advise.

- **Discuss next steps after giving feedback.**

- **Follow up.** Did the coaching session or sessions achieve the desired results? Follow up to ensure that there has been positive change, learning, or progress.
• **Acknowledge and reward successful coaching results.** Celebrate successes, progress, and achievements.

### 5. Help and guide employees with career development.

Career coaching and development -- helping employees to stay challenged and keep growing -- are important parts of every manager’s job. Career development is a two-way commitment that employees and employers make to each other. The employee commits to acquiring the skills and knowledge needed to stay valuable to the company, and the employer commits to supporting the employee by offering opportunities for development and growth. Growth doesn’t have to mean a move up the corporate ladder. It can mean offering employees opportunities for broadening their current skills so that they continue to feel challenged and marketable in a changing economy.

Make time for career development conversations with employees. During these conversations:

• **Ask about people’s career aspirations.** You might ask, “What do you hope to accomplish in the next six months? The next year? In five years?”

• **Ask about job satisfaction.** “What aspects of the job interest you most?” “Would you like to learn about . . .?”

• **Help the employee think about steps he or she can take to achieve career goals.** Think of ways that growth and developmental challenge can occur within the employee’s current job position. Perhaps he could work on a new initiative or high-stakes project, or work more with senior managers.

• **Encourage employees to take advantage of learning opportunities on the job.** On-the-job development should be part of every employee’s development plan. Provide ample opportunities for job shadowing, apprenticeships, mentoring, and other learning situations to help people broaden and expand skills.

• **Help employees find other ways to develop new skills,** either through further training or education. Promote continuous learning. Encourage employees to look for development opportunities outside the company by attending seminars, classes, workshops, or maybe pursuing a degree. Provide reading lists, if relevant. Urge employees to take training classes offered within the company. Offer employees the chance to coach or teach other employees.

• **Encourage people to take responsibility for their own career development.** Career development isn’t solely a manager’s job. Employees also have to take an active role. When you coach, encourage employees to assume more of this role themselves.

• **Delegate more.** It’s one of the best ways to develop employees.
A word on coaching your team

The ultimate goal of coaching is to build a stronger team. To do that, you must coach both the individuals you manage and the group.

- Encourage coaching and mentoring among team members. Help people find opportunities to coach one another.

- Suggest ways that people can work together on projects in order to share skills and advance learning.

- Encourage a team culture of knowledge and information sharing. One manager asked everyone in her group to spend a few minutes each week listing what he or she had worked on, and she did so herself. Sending these notes to the group caught everyone up in a fast, efficient way that the manager also reinforced with regular staff meetings.

- Be intentional about giving floor time to all members of your team.

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