

NEGOTIATION STRATEGIES

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DRIVING PERFORMANCE THROUGH COACHING



■ Raphael E. Lapin

In today's climate of shrinking workforces where the few are tasked with the work of the many, higher levels of efficiency and productivity are imperative. A useful and underutilized process to drive your employees to higher levels of self knowledge, awareness, discovery, action and productivity is coaching. As a manager, you are also a mentor, and it is important that you have coaching skills to draw out the best of your employees for their benefit and the benefit of the organization. There are four phases in the coaching process: identifying; discovering; planning for action; and evaluating. To cover these phases in detail is beyond the scope of this column, but I will share some general tips to improve your coaching skills and technique.

UNDERSTANDING COACHING

Coaching is a one-on-one process to provoke your employee into recognizing obstacles that are preventing him/her from advancing, to think creatively about ways to overcome those obstacles, to devise action plans and strategies, and to evaluate the results. It is about engaging employees in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to release, unlock and maximize their personal and professional potential. It is not the coach who develops the answers and solutions but the employee. The coach is merely the facilitator and the enabler who inspires the employee to solutions and actions. In coaching your employee, you should focus entirely on him/her and what is being said. Silence any thought processes that might be going on in

your own mind. Don't try to determine how to fix her problems or silently brainstorm solutions because that is her responsibility and not yours. The coaching objective is to help the employee achieve greater clarity, inspire new insights, generate new perspectives, organize thoughts and arrive at his/her own solutions.

QUESTIONING – THE ESSENCE OF COACHING

Peter Drucker, the well known management guru, categorized modern leadership with the following distinction: "The leader of the past knew how to tell – the leader of the future will know how to ask". Indeed, asking questions that elicit deeper thinking is to the coach what a palette is to the artist. It is the very tool of his trade. Not all questions however, generate deeper thinking.

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The question: "What is on your 'to do' list today?" does not inspire thinking or stretching and is therefore worthless in the coaching process. It will not drive new insights or different perspectives. Consider the following revision: "Which three to-dos on your list will have the greatest impact when completed?" This question forces the employee to think. When coaching, always make sure to ask questions that inspire deeper thought and could potentially unlock new ideas. It is those kinds of questions from which your employee will learn and benefit most. Also, when you have asked a question, wait patiently and silently for them to answer. Don't try to avoid the discomfort of silence by offering your own answer as this will rob your employee of the opportunity to reflect. If you notice that your employee seems reluctant to take responsibility or action as you coach him, ask explicitly: "Are you willing to take action?" If his answer is yes, you can then ask: "What do you think is preventing you from taking responsibility and action right now?" This is a very effective questioning sequence to use during coaching. As you advance in your coaching

skills you will build a repertoire of strong coaching questions and develop a sense of when and how to use them.

BALANCE ENCOURAGEMENT WITH CHALLENGE

When conducting a coaching session, your employee will be working hard. Give encouragement for even small breakthroughs. For example: "I really appreciated your rigorous soul-searching and I am impressed by the insight that it produced." This recognizes them for their effort and motivates them further. Make sure that your encouragement is genuine and not patronizing. Balance encouragement with challenge measure for measure. Be aware that challenge needs to stretch your employee beyond his/her current thinking and actions but not so far that it is beyond their competency. You will need to assess this

based on your knowledge of the employee. For example, if innovation or resourcefulness is not your employee's forte, don't challenge her with the question: "What would it take to accomplish that in half the time or with half the resources?" A better question might be: "What three steps could you take to do this more efficiently?" At the end of a coaching session the employee should feel invigorated, challenged and motivated to action.

Coaching is an often-overlooked key management skill, and as with any skill, needs to be learned, developed and practiced. When mastered, it is enriching for the manager, enlightening and expanding for the employee and ultimately the organization benefits.

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