

Leading By Supporting

Coaching clients to reinvent roles and rules

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Many coaches work with leaders who supervise others and evaluate their direct reports. Occasionally we encounter clients who have been referred to coaching in order to improve their performance as guides for quality control without an evaluative role with those they guide. Such leaders present a different coaching challenge as they learn to help staff improve their performance on specific tasks without direct supervisory authority.

Such was the case with a client I'll call Sharon who sought coaching after receiving strongly negative feedback from her own supervisor based on complaints from customer services staff and their supervisors. Feedback included perceptions that her manner was disrespectful, overbearing and inappropriate given the limitations of her role. In my first meeting with Sharon, I found her to be thoughtful, pleasant, knowledgeable and willing to make change. I also assessed that she was somewhat introverted and had a difficult time reaching out informally. She stated that she wanted to learn "better ways of giving feedback," but was unable



to identify exactly what she was doing to engender the feedback she received. She was able to relate a few instances of interactions that left the customer services group staff upset but she attributed these to personality differences. Her mental model for how to ensure compliance with the organization's standards was to convey the rules, point out errors and advise staff of how to do it right.

I interviewed her supervisor and four of the staff (two recommended by the client and two recommended by her supervisor), seeking some details about possible directions and

goals for coaching. I found it challenging to reconcile some aspects of the person that emerged in these interviews with the person I had met. Interviewees described a person who overstepped her role boundaries, withheld critical information and "thought she was the smartest person in the room." Combining the input from interviews and knowledge of the organization's recent history, I was able to identify client behaviors and some behaviors by leaders at top levels that impacted trust and role definitions at all levels of the organization.

Change is a process and, as such, may need to be facilitated in stages. I often conceive of a coaching plan as ripples in a pond. For this client, the challenge was where to toss the first pebble and how to ensure that the ripples eventually reached all the way to the shore. The client's initial measures of success were framed in terms of evidence of more trust: staff seeking out information or asking for her advice or assistance, rather than avoiding her; more staff input and feedback in the team meetings

for the individual. She also began participating in a weekly community service project with some staff, using the opportunity for more informal relationship building.

Ripple #2: Move from being a reactive leader to being a proactive leader.

To help the client make the shift, I helped the client think proactively about individual and team meetings, rehearsing possibilities and alternative strategies. We used futuring sce-

the right way to a new paradigm of maximizing each staff member's capacity through information sharing, mentoring and supportive action. At this stage, Sharon had a perfect on-going practice opportunity as she was asked to lead a team of some staff, including two of her strongest critics, to propose changes in the customer group services processes. Our coaching focused on helping Sharon reframe her role from teacher to learning partner. I provided her with information and tools to better understand the interpersonal and team dynamics that manifested in the way staff members related to her and to each other. I also shared some resources and tools for facilitating a collaborative problem-solving approach with individuals and with the team as a whole. We role-played her facilitation tactics and used futuring to anticipate and think proactively about team members' strengths, needs and interests.

While this coaching engagement is continuing, the client has reported several positive outcomes. She feels freer and more energized and feels that her leadership is more aligned with her core values. She is getting positive feedback from her biggest critics. One, in particular, has become one of her best allies in managing the team processes. Customer group service staff is buying into changes and team members are taking ownership of their own processes. She has received positive feedback from her supervisor, based on feedback from the staff via their supervisors. Overall, Sharon has made a successful leap from managing by directing to leading by supporting. ●

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she facilitated. With this as a starting point, the strategy for the coaching engagement emerged as three successive “ripples.”

Ripple #1: Scale back the friction and build good will.

To accomplish this, the client and I worked on the specific behaviors identified as problematic in the interviews. In particular, we found ways to cultivate her awareness of her body language and to create some alternatives that were more relaxed and inviting. The client engaged in actively gathering and processing information about the different staff members, attending to their communication styles and preferences, feedback needs, strengths and perspectives. Each coaching session ended with the client identifying some small steps to take to recognize and affirm each staff member and be responsive in ways that landed well

narios to anticipate possible impacts, outcomes and needs. I shared some basic coaching tools such as asking open-ended questions and prompting for more thinking instead of supplying answers. We used some sessions to rehearse these and other facilitation strategies, which I shared at her request. We also continued to polish her body language and word choices. The client reported more participation in meetings, including one staff member who had previously been resistant, sitting with crossed arms throughout the team sessions. Staff stepped into the spaces and opportunities the client created with her new facilitation style and shared their knowledge and opinions.

Ripple #3: Cultivate Staff Growth.

In this phase, we worked on moving the client from the old paradigm of correcting errors and instructing in