

Calling All Coaches! (This means EVERYONE)

When I first started to write this article I had planned to call it just “Calling all Coaches,” but then I quickly realized that this title would potentially scare away a large part of my intended audience. The reason for the title addendum is the varying use and definition of the term “coach.” Outside of the business world the definition is pretty clear; a coach is typically the leader of a sports team who Guides his or her players in all activities ranging from teaching basic skills, to giving instruction during practice, to providing feedback before, during and after an actual game. In the business world, the term “coach” can conjure different images and have multiple definitions.

For many organizations, the term “coach” is used primarily to describe a third party vendor or person who is hired to provide guidance to an individual (typically an executive or high potential employee) in order to help them develop a skill or behavior. This type of coaching is typically used in conjunction with a 360 feedback model or some type of assessment. In this scenario, a “coach” from outside the organization can be the best approach since oftentimes the subject matter is sensitive and an outside person may be required in order to provide truly objective guidance. Also, a higher level of coaching skill may be required to be able to effectively facilitate skill or behavior change as needed.

But the intent of this article is to go beyond the concept of “formal” coaches, whether they are hired from the outside or are designated “coaches” within the organization, and to explore the role that everyone can play in coaching on a day to day basis. If you do a quick online search of coaching, you will find many definitions but, no matter how you define it, the main purpose comes down to one thing, which is helping others to unlock their potential, improve their performance and achieve results. When you really think about it, these same fundamentals could be used to describe performance management. This is why many organizations are starting to adopt a more “agile” approach to performance

management, which places emphasis on “coaching” where managers communicate to help employees find their own solutions and regularly discuss their performance and achievements.

Coaching differs from feedback in that it is a two way conversation in which one person (typically a manager but certainly not limited to) asks sincere and thought provoking questions to help another person (typically a direct report), learn and grow in order to have more impact. An effective performance management process should encompass more than just feedback and encourage and support a coaching approach so that managers and employees are equally responsible and empowered in the process.

Just as some people are “natural born leaders,” some are “natural born coaches” and seem to have a knack for knowing the right questions to ask, balanced with good listening skills. But with the more widespread movement toward a coaching culture, many managers are finding that that they are not natural born coaches and struggle with the concept. As a result, they oftentimes fallback on giving straight up feedback or worse yet, say nothing at all. Although one simple article alone cannot propel someone to “coach of the year” status, there are a few simple actions that can be taken to improve coaching comfort and proficiency and help break the ice toward a coaching culture.

1. First and foremost, understand that coaching does not have to be a formal or lengthy process. It should ideally happen as close to the activity or action that has prompted the discussion in order to encourage “in the moment” learning.
2. Ask “open-ended” questions, which require more than a yes or no response. This allows your coachees to come to their own conclusions. Open-ended questions are typically prefaced by statements such as, “tell me about,” “how did,” “what could,” etc.

3. An easy way to open up a coaching discussion is to highlight something that worked well or a developed skill that was demonstrated, followed by an open-ended question to elicit more information. For example, “You really were able to showcase your problem skills in that meeting; what were your observations?”
4. Use your active listening skills! Be attentive and let the individual know you are hearing and understanding what they are saying and refrain from interjecting your own opinion. A great way to show that you are listening and to reinforce key points is to reflect or paraphrase what the person is saying. For example, “So you feel that you could have used the meeting time more effectively if you had people come prepared with their questions about the subject?”
5. Finally, do not ask questions with the intent to “lead the witness.” If you want/need to give feedback directly, do so. Don’t ask questions with the intent of hoping the individual will get to the point you want to make. Doing so will come across as manipulative and derail the purpose of coaching which is to help an individual’s self-growth, learning, and development.

If you haven’t considered yourself a coach in the past, whether you’re a people manager or an individual contributor, give it a try today. You may find that you are a “natural born coach” after all and you will definitely discover the benefits of engaging in a conversation that helps someone unlock their potential, improve their performance, and achieve results.

