

DEVELOPING YOUR COACHING SKILLS

By Jean Strosinski, PCC

Third article of six in the series: *Coaching for Performance*

Are you a **Coach** in your work environment? Do your colleagues come to you with gripes, questions, information, a desire to brainstorm and asking for options to improve your workplace? Today, you may, or may not, carry an official title of Coach in your organization. Over the next ten years, however, you may find yourself “being the coach” as corporations move to instill coaching models as a means to enhance and improve workplace performance and even change organizational culture.

Is it possible that your colleagues and/or management may see you as having coach qualities because you are a person who sets realistic goals, minimizes problems, supports and encourages others, provides guidance and direction and has a command of language? In some way, you may be a model of success and others would like to emulate your style. At the heart of it all, you have an awareness and sense of responsibility that provides strength to those you work for and work with.

If you see yourself in the description above, then you have a uniquely developed a set of skills enabling you to coach more effectively. The basis for the development of your coaching skills relies on your ability to communicate. It is important for you to understand and “get” that everyone has the answer(s). The role of the coach, then, is to provide a means for the coachee to discover and uncover the answer and frame it successfully to move to positive action.

Five skills, *listen, evoke, respond, discuss*, and *support* are described by Thomas Leonard (1994), founder of Coach University, as the skills for today’s coaches. John Whitmore, in *Coaching for Performance* (1996), strengthens Leonard’s list, giving a particular focus and emphasis to *listening*. He also adds the skill of *self-awareness* as a means to remain objective and detached as a means to not influence the communication.

A few comments on each of the skills as outlined by Leonard and Whitmore:

Listen: Be Quiet (the nicer way to say “shut up”). Be attentive and listen to understand what is being said. Show that you have a true interest in what you are hearing. Listen to the tone of voice, choice of words, the mood, needs, etc. Listen also for the body – are the words saying one thing and the body something else. You won’t have all the answers and you don’t have to. Remember the person you are coaching has the answer!

Evoke: Ask questions, and **more** questions to direct them to say more. Ask for clarification. Have the individual define the problem. Focus on their need(s) and support them to discover the next step(s). Coach from a comfortable place. Allow them to discover their own answer(s).

Respond: Always, tell the truth. Explain what you see and feel based on what is being said. Encourage the person to go with their inklings, what feels right for them. If they are not “getting it”, then do a reality check. Use messages and make sure they understand the message.

Discuss: Dialogue....ask more questions; provide more comments, more messages. Listen for where they are now. Are they accepting what they are hearing from themselves, rebelling, avoiding, denying, etc.? Have they discovered the answer(s) and are they ready to move to action?

Support: Ask them what they need from you to help them move to action? Let them tell you what support they need and then do so. Encourage, motivate, be there – go that extra mile to let them know you care and support them and that they can achieve success.

You will notice that the phrase, “ask questions,” is used in four of the five skills for coaching. Verbal interaction is best modeled and characterized by the interrogative. (Whitmore, 1996) And to do this, effective questioning will elicit relevant and specific information. Information is not requested for the coach, and does not even have to be complete. The process of open questioning is used to allow the coachee a chance to formulate their information and discover or uncover their answer(s). The coachee now generates self-awareness and is able to establish a responsibility in the situation. It is a more effective way for the coachee to take ownership and move toward their purpose or objective.

Whitmore is specific about the phrasing of questions. Using *what, when, how much, how many* are key words to provide more data and factual responses. Instead of asking *why*, ask, “*What are the reasons?*” And, instead of asking “*how*,” phrase the question by asking, “*What were the steps?*” The key is to move to the specific, keeping the coachee engaged. Allow them to direct and trust they will “get it.”

A final note from Whitmore offers a word of advice on the skill of self-awareness for the

coach. It is important the coach not influence the objectivity. Strive to have a relationship in balance without an issue of authority between you and the coachee. You may be their manager, a subject matter expert, a mentor, their team leader, or a colleague. However, when you coach you are all those roles second, and a **Coach** first.

Your fieldwork ... coach a colleague. Try being a **Coach** and give a gift of compassion to a co-worker by supporting them to discover or uncover the answer(s) to a difficult situation. Identify which of the coaching skills – *listen, evoke, respond, discuss, support* – are strengths for you. Which of the skills would you like to improve?

Coming up in the next article, *Coaching for Real Performance*, I will provide an example of coaching – a dialogue in summary as an example of coaching for performance.

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