



The Goals of Good Coaching

The four district managers aren't getting their phone messages fast enough. They're upset about it, and they say they're losing orders because of it.

All fingers point at Sonya. Incoming calls are routed to her phone, and her voice mail backs everybody up. You've got to solve the problem. What's your first move?

We'll come back to this situation after you've learn about the goals of good coaching and how management by coaching will help you get the information you need.

Are You Wasting Your Most Valuable Resource?

According to a recent survey by Market Facts' TeleNation, more than 90 percent of the employees polled believe they have good ideas about how their companies could be run more successfully. However, only 38 percent think their employers would be interested in hearing those ideas, making employees' ideas a most wasted resource.

Do workers feel comfortable coming to you with suggestions? Maybe your door is always open, but is anybody walking through it?

An Accessibility Quotient Quiz

Your “Accessibility Quotient” is your openness to input from your staff. How would your workers respond to the following statements? Answer “yes” or “no” as you think they’d *really* respond, not as you’d like them to.

My boss

1. asks for my opinion frequently.
2. listens to my suggestions.
3. takes my ideas seriously.
4. values my opinion.
5. checks with me before making a decision that affects my work.
6. would defend me in a meeting of supervisors.
7. explains goals clearly when giving me a new project.
8. welcomes my questions about an ongoing project.
9. gives me latitude in deciding how to carry out a project.
10. saves criticism for one-on-one sessions.

What Your Responses Tell You About Your Management Style

Did you rack up seven or more positive responses on the Accessibility Quotient Quiz? If so, you’re already exhibiting many of the attributes of a good coach. One of the main goals of management by coaching is to create an atmosphere in which employees are willing and able to share their ideas with their superior.

Getting fewer than seven positive responses doesn’t mean you’re a failure, however. A low score just means you’ve got some work to do. (That low score may also indicate that you’re more honest and self-critical than most managers.)

Let’s look at each statement and what it indicates about your working relationship with your employees.

1. My boss asks for my opinion frequently. The people who work with you already know you don’t have all the answers. So when you ask for an employee’s input, three good things happen, before you even get an answer: (1) you show your respect for the employee, (2) you show that you don’t think

you have a corner on wisdom, and (3) you open yourself to an opportunity to get valuable information. “How do you think we should handle it?” can be one of the best things you ever say to an employee.

2. My boss listens to my suggestions. Asking is

only half of the process. Listening is the other half.

Give employees your full attention. Indicate by word and gesture that you’re taking in what they say. Ask questions. Respond honestly.

3. My boss takes my ideas seriously. You say, “Uh-huh. That’s ... interesting.”

The employee hears, “Thanks for nothing. Now we’ll do it my way.”

You won’t necessarily agree with employees’ perspectives, and you may not act on their suggestions. But if they offer the input sincerely, you should take it seriously.

If you think an idea has merit, say so. If you think it’s flawed, say why. Discuss ideas, not personalities. Never allow the discussion to become a battle between “your idea” and “their idea” or a contest with a winner and a loser.

4. My boss values my opinion. You show that you value an opinion by listening to it, by taking it seriously, and by rewarding it. Most businesses reward results—jobs successfully com-

Watch Out for Attitude

If you hesitated before answering some of these questions, you may be revealing a lack of awareness of workers’ attitudes. If so, pay particular attention to tips in this book on becoming sensitive to employee feedback, which includes written and oral messages, of course, and also body language and other indicators.



Ask Their Opinions

Unfortunately, many employees go to work every day without ever being asked for their opinions. They won’t expect you to want that input unless you ask for it, and they may not trust you when you do. Be patient, walk your talk, and you’ll win their trust and candor.



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pleted, goals reached, bottom lines enriched—if they reward employee performance at all. Appreciation should begin much earlier in the process, when you’re looking for hard work, cooperation, and creative input.

It takes courage and initiative for an employee to speak up. Reward that courage through your words and deeds. Questions and suggested alternatives are positive contributions, not threats.

5. My boss checks with me before making a decision that affects my work. You’re the boss. You make the decisions. But when a decision affects working conditions, you should talk it over with employees and get their input first—not only to show that you respect them, but also to help you make the best decision.

6. My boss would defend me in a meeting of supervisors. Are you willing to go to bat for your employees, to fight for them, to defend them from unjust attacks, and to take your share of the blame when something goes wrong?

Would your workers say that you’re a “stand-up boss”? There’s no higher praise they can give you.

7. My boss explains goals clearly when giving me a new project. Employees are no better at reading your mind than you are at reading theirs. When you give them a task, do you take the time to outline in clear, simple terms exactly what they should accomplish? An employee who understands the

overall purpose of her work will do a better job and feel better about doing it. And you’ll prevent costly mistakes down the line.

8. My boss welcomes my questions about an ongoing project. “Do you understand?”



Prepare and Be Clear

If you’ve ever tried to explain anything to anybody, you know how difficult it can be to say something clearly and simply. Prepare yourself before you give instructions. Think the job through, and anticipate potential snags and confusion.

Giving Instructions

Be careful about the amount and nature of the directions you give. Make sure that directions are appropriate to the situation.

“I want you to increase sales by five percent in the next quarter” may be enough of a charge for a trusted salesperson with experience, product knowledge, and the necessary authority to do the job (for example, the ability to negotiate the terms of an offer or to spend up to a set amount for increased promotion). However, “I want you to make 30 copies of each of these handouts, and I want you to do it by taking them down to the copy machine and setting the counter to 30 and feeding in the originals one at a time” is probably a whole lot more instruction than most people need—or appreciate.



When most folks ask that question, they expect a quick “Yes” (in the same way most of us expect a perfunctory “Fine, thanks” when we ask, “How are you?”).

Employees’ questions will seem like interruptions and irritations—unless you train yourself to expect and even welcome them. Questions are often the only way you really know what an employee has heard and understood. Employees willing to ask you a question now—knowing that they won’t be penalized for showing “ignorance”—will do a better job.

9. My boss gives me latitude in deciding how to carry out a project.

Explain goals clearly and precisely. Answer all questions. But don’t always spell out exactly how those goals should be reached. Whenever possible, leave room for creativity and initiative.

10. My boss saves criticism for one-on-one sessions.

Praise in public, criticize in private—not so that people will think you’re a nice person, but because it works. Public criticism engenders defensiveness and anger—in the employee criticized and in everybody else within earshot. Criticism in private, delivered decisively but respectfully, has a much

better chance of getting you what you want—improved performance.

The Benefits of Good Coaching

Effective coaching moves an employee from WIIFM (What's in it for me?) to WIIFU (What's in it for us?). It enables you, as the coach, to reap specific benefits from your efforts. Let's look at the benefits you can derive from being a successful coach.

Helps Develop Employees' Competence

Watch a loving parent initiate a child into the mysteries of riding a two-wheeled bicycle. First the parent instructs the child and then shows how it is done. But at some point the



Smart
Managing

Success Builds on Itself

The goal of good coaching isn't just to help employees reach a certain performance level. It's important to realize that one success engenders another and instills the self-confidence that leads to high levels of motivation and performance in many tasks.

kid has to climb on that bicycle and ride it alone.

Now imagine that you're the loving parent, running beside the wobbling bike, shouting encouragement, your hand first tightly clutching the handle bars and then gradually loosening your grip until finally, your

heart in your throat, you let go, launching your child into the world.

Now imagine that you're the child on the bike. You're terrified and exhilarated, concentrating on keeping the pedals pumping and the bike from dumping. But at some point—hours, days, or maybe even weeks later—you realize that the balancing act, at first seemingly impossible, has become second nature. You don't have to think about riding the bike; you can just do it—and enjoy it.

You no longer need your coach. And that's the point. Good coaches keep creating situations where they're no longer needed.

Helps Diagnose Performance Problems

If employees aren't performing at peak efficiency, you have to figure out the reason. Too often, getting input from the people closest to the job, the employees themselves, is overlooked.

A good coach first asks for employee input, then listens to it. By doing so, you're more likely to make the right diagnosis, and you're also more likely to get worker cooperation in arriving at a solution. If employees feel empowered to solve the problem, they'll solve it.



Keep an Open Mind
 When you seek causes for problems, be ready to abandon your assumptions. You may assume, for example, that the person closest to the origin of the problem is responsible for it. But if you keep an open mind, you might find the bottleneck elsewhere, perhaps even at the supervisory level.

Helps Correct Unsatisfactory or Unacceptable Performance

Once you've found the source of the problem, you can decide how to correct it. Here again, don't overlook a rich potential source of solutions—the employees themselves.

Brainstorm with a group of employees and let them help you evaluate potential actions.

Helps Diagnose a Behavioral Problem

Behavioral problems are sticky territory. Performance is at least somewhat objective. You can count outputs and actions taken, and you can compare today's performance with yesterday's and mine with yours. But



Deal with the Problem
 "Don't shoot all the dogs," Paul Newman as Hud Bannon advises, "just because one of them's got rabies."
 If you determine that the problem lies with one employee's phone-answering performance, don't send all the employees to phone-answering school. Work—or arrange to have someone else work—with the specific employee on the specific problem. In this way, you won't be wasting anybody else's time, and you won't create resentment.

evaluating employees' behavior is often a matter of assessing attitude and demeanor.

You may think that some employees spend way too much time chatting about personal matters when they should be tending to business. But how much time is “too much”? Others may view your workplace and comment on the friendliness and seeming cooperation among staff members. You're on much safer ground when you confine employee evaluations to outputs you can measure. If those chatty employees are getting their work done, if that work is satisfactory, and if their conversation isn't bothering anybody else, the “problem” may be nothing more than your own irritation. (You might even be a little jealous, feeling that you don't even have time to breathe, much less chat, during the workday.)

Behavioral guidelines are often vague, but the stakes can be staggeringly high—in lawsuits and grievances alleging discrimination, for example.

Using the basic principles of good coaching is even more important in these situations. Involve relevant employees in defining the situation and in determining whether behaviors are getting in the way of performance. Keep an open mind, and keep your assumptions to yourself. Be willing to



Make Them Aware

It's not unusual for employees to complain that other employees are bothering them. When this happens, those doing the bothering are usually unaware of how their behavior is affecting others. Often the situation can be improved by sensitively informing the offending individuals how others feel and by making suggestions on how to make improvements.

explain any decisions you may make, along with options for appeal to a higher level.

Helps Correct Unsatisfactory or Unacceptable Behavior

Three of the four members of your office staff are chatting happily; the fourth is seething. Patti considers the talk to be

petty gossip. It's distracting and annoying, she tells you, especially when she's on the phone with a potential client. She

feels that her own job performance is suffering. She also lets you know, without saying so directly, that she doesn't see how the others could possibly be getting their work done with all that conversation. Her solution? She wants permission to bring in her CD player so that she can use music to screen out the noise.

How about it, coach? Do you let Patti bring in her CDs—which may or may not improve her work performance but will surely give her a clear “victory” over the other three? Do you give Patti a pair of earplugs and tell her to tough it out? Do you send a memo to all personnel outlining guidelines for maintaining a “professional atmosphere” in the office?

You might come up with a list of possible solutions (including, of course, the ever-popular “do nothing, and hope it blows over”). No matter how long that list is, you won't come up with one suggestion that doesn't make somebody mad.

There's a better way, coach: huddle up with the players and talk it through. You'll learn how to conduct these sessions, step by step, in later chapters. You'll get the results you want—and you'll save time doing it.

Fosters Productive Working Relationships

“Works well with others.” When I was growing up, teachers let parents know on report cards how we were getting along with the other kids. We went to school to learn social skills (wait your turn, share your crayons, no kicking, and so on) as well as academic subjects.

In the office, people are not graded on their social skills—at least not in so many words. Companies set performance objectives, but still talk about intangibles like “attitude” and whether or not an employee is a “team player.” They still want people to “work well with others”; they just call it something different.

As you apply the techniques of good coaching in the workplace, you'll notice better performance from your employees and also employees helping each other. When you set the example as head coach, people take the hint and start coach-

ing each other to higher levels of performance. You couldn't order them to do it, but it can happen without your saying a thing.

Focuses on Providing Appropriate Guidance and Counseling

Nobody's suggesting that you provide therapy. In fact, if you tried, you'd get in more trouble than you can imagine. But as a coach, you can and should be a mentor for any worker who



Guidance Giving people direction on how to perform and how to improve their performance.

Counseling Helping employees become more aware of their behavior; how it might cause problems on the job, and how to turn things around.

seeks or is open to your guidance. You're dealing with human beings, not components in a piece of equipment. Employees want a lot more than a paycheck at the end of the week and a performance evaluation at the end of the year. They think about their careers

within and without the organization. They deserve to know the unwritten rules, the stuff that never shows up in the handbook. Who's there to guide them through the rapids? Nobody but you, coach.

Provides Opportunities for Conveying Appreciation

Many of us have a hard time saying "Thank you" or "Good job." We lack formal occasions and established patterns for giving praise, and we find it difficult to ad-lib.

Coaching provides natural opportunities to praise good work and strong effort

Fosters Self-coaching Behaviors

As you become an effective coach, you'll find that employees will become more and more competent. When you coach an employee through a challenge, you teach that employee to figure out how to deal with similar problems in the future.

Remember: your role isn't just about getting specific tasks

completed. It's about creating more competent and committed employees who have the ability to add ever-higher levels of value to the organization.

Improves Employee Performance and Morale

Call it "morale." Call it "self-esteem." Call it whatever you want. How your staff members feel about themselves and their roles in the workplace makes a big difference in their performances.

Coaching them with respect does a lot to improve that morale. And it also affects their performance. By allowing employees to take responsibility and initiative for their work, you'll improve their morale in ways no seminar, pep talk, or self-help book ever could.

This tenth point, then, is the culmination of the first nine. As you increase performance through coaching, you also improve morale. Your ability to coach effectively communicates to employees that you care about them and are committed to helping them improve. This can translate into their being committed and excited about their work. And this naturally leads to higher performance and higher morale. In other words, all these actions go together, and coaching is the method that makes it happen.

Meanwhile, Back at the Message Board...

Let's go back to the story at the beginning of this chapter. Along with complaints from the managers that they aren't getting their phone messages quickly enough, you've heard a few comments from customers—not complaints, exactly, just off-hand statements about a call not returned, an order not routed to the right department, a question lost in the shuffle.

You need to act decisively and promptly. You want to improve the message system, of course, and you also want to retain the trust and confidence of your managers. What are your options?

1. Send a memo to everybody in the office outlining proper

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phone procedures. That way, Sonya will get the message without feeling singled out. Besides, other folks might benefit from the reminder.

2. Warn Sonya about the problem, give her three months to shape up, and put a note in her personnel file. To hell with her feelings. She's falling down on the job, and she needs to shape up.
3. Send Sonya to a workshop on telephone technique. She's probably trying to do a good job. Maybe she just doesn't know how.
4. Investigate a new voice-mail system. By spending a few bucks, you may be able to fix the problem without upsetting Sonya.
5. Do nothing. It's been especially hectic lately. The situation might work itself out when things simmer down. Besides, Sonya has made no secret about being unhappy with her job. Maybe she'll take a lateral transfer soon.

So what's your call, coach?

"None of the above." You don't know enough about the problem to create a solution. You need more information—and one of the best sources of that information is sitting out in the front office right now, fuming about how mean everybody's been to her lately.

In later chapters, we'll discuss the best ways to get that information. For now, let's listen in on a conversation that will give you a good sense of how a skillful coach might handle the situation.

You: "I'd like to take a look at the way we handle phone messages. Can you give me a few minutes to explain the system to me?"

Sonya: "Sure. Now's fine."

(Notice how cooperative employees are when you get to write both sides of the dialog! Sonya explains how messages get bumped to her when a manager doesn't pick up after three rings. If she's on another call, voice mail picks up immediately. If she's out of the office, and nobody catches the call,

the phone rings three more times before voice mail takes the message.)

You: “So, in that case, a caller has to wait through six rings before getting any response?”

Sonya: “Yep. But they’ll hear a click after three rings when the call transfers. They should know what’s going on.”

You: “Do we have any way of knowing if somebody hangs up before the sixth ring?”

Sonya: “Not that I know of. I can call the company and check.”

You: “That would be great. Let me know what you find out. Now, suppose the call kicks over to you, and you get it on the first ring.”

Sonya: (shaking her head vigorously): “I never pick up on the first ring.”

You: “Why is that?”

Sonya: “Because if it’s one of those stupid computer solicitations, they usually hang up before the second ring.”

You: “I didn’t know that.”

Sonya: “Oh, yeah. The computer dials ten numbers at a time. When one picks up, they hang up on the other nine.”

You: (guiding the conversation back on course): “So, the phone rings five times before you pick up, right?”

Sonya: “Yeah. Then I take a message.”

You: “Right. And what happens if you don’t pick up after five rings?”

Sonya: “They get my voice mail.”

You: “Right. How often do you harvest the messages?”

Sonya: “I always check right away if I’ve been out of the office.”

You: “Excellent. Then what do you do with the messages?”

CAUTION!

Avoid Sarcasm

In a conversation like this, there may be a tendency for an employee to get sarcastic. It’s important not to respond negatively to this. You should also not become sarcastic in response, or neither of you will take the conversation seriously and your respect for each other may be undermined. Instead, ignore the sarcasm and keep the conversation focused on information gathering and problem solving.

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Sonya: “I stick them on the message board, behind the old copier.”

You: “That copier hasn’t worked for eight months.”

Sonya: “Right.”

You: “So, that’s what that board’s for.”

Sonya: “It’s been there for five years.”

You: “No kidding?”

Sonya: “You and the managers. They act like they don’t know what it is, either.”

You: “How’s that?”

Sonya: “Phone messages really pile up over there. Randy [a manager] only comes in for his messages once a day, after lunch. Sometimes he’ll have 15 or 20 up there.”

You: “Any ideas on how we might get things moving faster?”

Sonya: “If you mean that I should carry the messages down to their offices for them every time, I can tell you right now, I wouldn’t get anything else done if I did that.”

You: “I wouldn’t even suggest such a thing. Any other ideas?”

Sonya: “Why don’t I just put the messages in everybody’s mailboxes? They’re right next door.”

You: “How often do they check the mailboxes?”

Sonya: “Good point. Most of them only go in there once a day, after I sort the mail.”

You: “Any other ideas?”

Sonya: “Yeah. Why don’t you kick a little butt and tell the managers to check their messages more often?”

You: “I don’t know about kicking butt, but I will see if I can get people to check more often.”

Sonya: “Maybe we could move the message board to a better place—like right behind the coffee pot and the microwave.”

You: “Everybody would see messages there, all right.”

Sonya: “Yeah, and everybody else will see how Randy lets his messages stack up.”

You: “Let’s give it a try. Maybe we can even get Randy to check more often. Can you write up a work order to have it moved?”

Sonya: “Sure, but I’m not sure how much good it will do. The folks in maintenance don’t take these requests too seriously.”

You: “Yeah, I know. However, I’ll make a call over there and emphasize the importance of taking care of this now. After it’s been up about a week, let’s get together so you can bring me up to date on how well it’s working. Maybe we could kick around some other ideas for improving the system.”

Sonya: “Sure.”

You: “Thanks.”

That’s how the dialog *might* go. Still, however it proceeds, you can expect the interchange to be productive when employees trust you enough to express themselves freely with the expectation that you’re there to help. And it’s likely that you’ll make progress toward a solution even if you don’t solve the problem outright.

And that’s what this book is all about—helping you achieve peak employee performance through good coaching. Read on.

The Coach’s Checklist for Chapter 1

- If you’re not developing your people, you’re wasting your most valuable resource.
- How accessible are you? If you didn’t take the accessibility quiz, go back and do it now.
- Coaching is good for employees, and it’s good for managers as well. By coaching you build the relationships that will result in continuously improved performance for you and your employees.