

Coaching:

The Power of Investing in Relationship

By Micki McMillan, MCC

Pedro, a long-time employee in a manufacturing company, needs to have a potentially difficult conversation with his colleague from engineering, Joe, about the recent decline in the quality of Joe's work. Pedro is a supervisor on the production line, and he has had to redo several jobs because Joe failed to double-check the specifications, resulting in his submission of inaccurate designs. In the past, Pedro and Joe have been not only good friends, but also a great team. Joe has been testy, quiet and moody of late, and Pedro wants help so that he can skillfully and effectively discuss his dilemma with Joe without jeopardizing his relationship with him. Pedro decides to go to Sandra because he knows that she will help him bring forth his own ideas about how to handle this situation. While Sandra is Pedro's boss, she also doubles as his coach.

As a leader in your organization, you wear many hats. You are responsible for managing your resources in order to add value to the organization. It's a big job, and one of the toughest parts of leadership is people management. Depending on how much you already have on your plate, the tendency can be to focus mostly on employee outputs, rather than the employees themselves. Did Alana get the report done? Did Josh hit the sales target? Instead of having an eye to your staff's ongoing development (isn't that HR's job?), they may show up on your radar only when there is a problem. If you don't have a lot of time, perhaps you fix the problem yourself. The likelihood that this problem recurs: high. The increase in organizational intelligence: zero.

However, strategic 21st-century leaders get more involved with their employees, not less. While it may appear to be yet another demand on your limited time, adding employee coaching to your repertoire is one of the best investments you can make.¹

The underlying assumption here is that we human beings are living, evolving potentials. Like seeds, give us the right soil, rain, sunshine and weeding, and we know how to flower.

“*Each one of you is perfect the way you are and you can use a little improvement.*

— Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, Japanese Zen Priest (1905–1971)

Similarly, given an opportunity to tap into, develop and harness our own brilliance and capacity, we can contribute greatly to the health and well-being of our organizations. A coaching relationship provides such an opportunity. A process that increases participants' IQ, EQ and CQ², coaching invites innovation, a culture of learning, employee development and empowerment, and a work environment characterized by caring, trust, commitment and dedication, all critical elements in creating a dynamic, healthy, generative organization in an era of great change.²

“Coaching lies at the heart of management, not at the edges...

Coaching is everything you do to ignite personal and team learning in solving business problems while building the organizational capability you need to succeed.

— Robert Hargrove, *Masterful Coaching Fieldbook*

What Exactly Is Coaching?

Isn't it simply telling someone else what to do? As a matter of fact, on the contrary! Coaching involves bringing forth the knowledge, wisdom and insight of another through asking incisive questions, listening deeply and keenly observing patterns and habits your coachee may have. Instead of knowing it all, you, along with the person you are coaching, are curious and open to learning and previously unimagined possibility. As such, coaching is an inherently creative activity. What if, for example, instead of jumping in to solve Pedro's problem with Joe, Sandra gave Pedro an opportunity to develop a solution himself by providing space, attention, curiosity, reflection and insight?

Listen in:

Pedro: Sandra, I need some help in figuring out what to say to Joe. We have been good friends and have done great work together for the company, but lately I've had to correct a lot of his errors, mostly after the jobs have been completed. It has cost us a lot of money, the guys on the floor are getting annoyed, and, worst of all, I'm losing respect for him.

Sandra: What would you like to accomplish in your conversation with Joe?

Pedro: I want him to know that he's adversely impacting my organization, I'm losing trust in his work, and I want him to double check the specs before submitting the work orders to my department.

Sandra: What result would you get if your conversation were successful?

Pedro: I would trust Joe again, he would commit to being more careful about his work, the designs he submits to my team would be accurate, and we would be able to restore our friendship.

Sandra: What do you need to do to get that?

Pedro: Well, I need to be really clear with my facts. I'm also aware that I'm pretty angry. What I don't want to have happen is for me to lash out at him. I guess I really want him to know that I care about him, his work and our friendship. And I hope that by skillfully communicating to him the breakdowns that are taking place, he will find a way to change.

Sandra: OK, I suggest that we practice the conversation. What if I pretend that I'm Joe and you can try out your words on me? Would that help you?

Pedro: Yes, that would be good. I think that once I've thought through the conversation, it will go well.

One of your goals as coach is to articulate the current reality your coachee faces and help her identify her desired outcome. Then you can explore together what action she needs to take to close the gap between the present situation and her goal.

Pedro's case, the reality he faces is that Joe's work is substandard, and he is losing trust in his co-worker and former friend. Sandra helps him become clear about his desired outcomes, which are to alert Joe to the breakdowns and repair the relationship. Note that she does not tell Pedro how to handle the situation; instead, she encourages him to define his own goals and methods, and she gives him an opportunity to practice a potentially new way to communicate. By having Sandra as a nonjudgemental sounding board, Pedro can try out several conversations. Through having the space to do so, he is likely to generate a variety of creative alternatives, and Sandra can give him feedback as to their effectiveness throughout the process.

Unlike typical manager-employee interactions, which are largely transactional in nature (I tell you to do something for me and you complete it), coaching is more relational. Something new is possible when two people come together in this way. Not only are innovative solutions generated, but your coachee is also empowered and further developed, you both learn and grow from the process, and you deepen your personal bond, which builds trust, loyalty and mutual commitment.

As in the example with Pedro above, Sandra learns something about herself through helping Pedro have a successful conversation, since she has also had to have difficult conversations with others. She is always open to learning about how to be more skillful in them. By coaching Pedro, she gains insights about her own strengths and weaknesses, and she may get some new ideas about how to approach such situations in the future.

“You cannot teach humans anything. You can only help them discover it within themselves.

— Galileo

The Challenge: Being a Know-It-All

The great temptation when coaching is to come off as the expert, telling your coachees what to do. Yet in doing so, you rob them of the opportunity to learn. And if they do not learn, you are setting yourself up for continually having to provide the same “expert” advice each time a similar circumstance arises. This is a great waste of your time at the very least, and a lost opportunity in empowering them to discover their own greatness. When coaching, rather than doing it for them, you create a context in which they can learn and enhance their capabilities, making them increasingly competent, effective and confident. As such, building coaching into your overall strategy is a great way to handle succession-management issues.

Moreover, telling people what they *should* do is a form of arrogance. You are putting yourself in a position of *knowing* what is best for them. Being the Dear Abby of the organization may be very satisfying for you, but it doesn't serve the people whom you are advising. Furthermore, when you are expected to *know everything*, you put yourself in an inherently stressful situation. First of all, it is impossible for you to know everything. The world is changing too quickly and there is too much information available for any one person to assimilate. You are also setting yourself up for humiliation every time a new circumstance arises that requires an innovative solution. If you are not open to learning and benefiting from others' wisdom, you will likely lead your organization into eventual failure.

“*Learning and innovation go hand in hand. The arrogance of success is to think that what you did yesterday will be sufficient for tomorrow.*

— William Pollard, Chairman, The ServiceMaster Company

Coaching: Leading from Your Being

Shifting hats from being a manager to a coach involves moving from a doing role into more of a being role. You are most likely to succeed when you have the time and patience to be skillful, supportive, open and ready to learn, not the easiest thing to do given the rapid pace at most organizations. However, coaching truly embodies the adage “Hasten slowly.” Taking the time to develop and build relationships with your employees has a large ROI.³ And truly, it’s less about committing large quantities of time to the task and more about dedicating quality time and attention to it.

It is also important to be patient with yourself in the role of coach—just as Rome wasn’t built in a day, a beginner does not become a master over-night. It isn’t always easy to change your pace from hard-driving manager to coach mode. Practice, plus seeing the fruits of your efforts, will encourage you to stick with it.

Although there is no “recipe” for a coaching conversation, here are a few key principles to incorporate into the process:

1. Prepare yourself.

Intentionally shift into the role of coach. Be ready to listen, learn and be curious. Bracket a particular amount of time for the conversation. Because it is a creative process, coaching takes time. Twenty minutes invested in a coaching conversation can

pay great dividends down the line. Relax, take some deep breaths and open yourself to possibilities. Imagine yourself holding a space for your coachee’s process of self-discovery, as you serve as the steward of mutual learning.

2. Listen deeply without reservation or judgment.

The more open you are, the more likely your coachee will speak. Make soft eye contact; focus only on what he is saying. Open your heart and your mind. Allow yourself to forget everything in your environment except this conversation. Turn off your phone, shut down your computer and ensure you will not be interrupted by outsiders.

3. Ask questions with curiosity and wonder.

Experiment with not knowing what the answers or even the questions that might arise will be. This can be a lot of fun! When you do this, you invite your intuition to step forward, and you may find yourself eliciting powerful insights from your coachee. Open-ended questions are great for generating new ideas. If a coachee is stuck in one way of thinking, you can ask more outside-the-box questions such as “If you had a magic wand and could generate any outcome, what would that be?” Questions that provoke both thought and feelings are helpful as well. Sandra might ask, for example, “What if Joe were to quit before you have your conversation with him?” For all she knows, Pedro might be relieved if he is conflict avoidant. But perhaps Pedro responds, “Wow! I would be really sad about that. I also know he is capable of really good work when he is on. I really want to make this work with Joe.”

4. Relate to your coachee with compassion and humility.

When we are open to learning, we can be quite vulnerable. Remember the first time you played golf or spoke a foreign language to a native speaker? You may have felt awkward or clumsy, and were much more self-conscious than in a more familiar situation. Create an environment that is safe for your coachee by modeling learning yourself. One way of doing this is to share your own past mistakes, along with the insights you have gained, with him.

5. Connect the dots.

Through deep listening and astute observation, you are going to recognize patterns, inconsistencies and gaps that your coachee may not see. As a coach, you can reveal what you observe in the spirit of helping your coachee become better at self-observation. All of us have blind spots, and coaching can help us move from blindness to powerful insights. For example, after Pedro practiced his mock conversation with Sandra, she observed that he still acted angry, even though he was telling “Joe” that he cared about him. This is invaluable information.

6. Move to action.

When your coachee has identified solutions or has begun to develop a new skill, what actions is she is going to take to reinforce her learning, and when? This step is critical in the coaching conversation, since it launches the coachee into the realm of “reality.” By taking action, the learner realizes that her wings will, indeed, support her in flight. Pedro took action by writing down all of the things he wanted to tell Joe and then practicing the conversation in front of a mirror until he felt comfortable meeting with Joe directly.

7. Follow up.

Set a time to reconvene with your coachee to see how he has fared. Sandra and Pedro met after Pedro’s conversation with Joe, and Pedro debriefed her, sharing what he had learned with Sandra.

As you can see, coaching requires time, patience and a particular quality of presence. Obviously, when faced with urgent situations, you, as a leader, cannot afford the time it takes to coach. You must be the directive boss. There are other situations in which it might be more suitable to act as a mentor. This is akin to providing a one-way download of accumulated wisdom that you have acquired with your experience and study, which can directly benefit others.

As human beings with eyes, ears, minds and hearts, we all have the capacity to coach. If you follow the key principles outlined above, pay attention and continue to learn from the results or feedback you get from your coachees, you are well equipped for the task. If, however, you are interested in training in this discipline more deeply, visit the International Coach Federation website (www.coachfederation.org). This site has more information about what coaches do, and it describes the core competencies coaches should have. There is also information on a number of accredited coach-training programs. Additionally, you might look into the many books on executive and leadership coaching published today that can help you to hone your craft.

In case you were wondering, Pedro’s conversation with Joe went very well. By the time Pedro went to Joe, he no longer felt angry and he was very clear about what he wanted to say. He was able to listen to Joe, who admitted he had some serious stresses at home, including his terminally ill mother, which adversely affected his mood and the quality of his work. Pedro was able to serve as a coach to Joe, listening to his

family circumstances and asking him questions that allowed Joe to realize that his family needed more support. Pedro then supported Joe in designing an action plan to get that help. Pedro modeled a way of interacting that really inspired Joe, so Joe is now interested in developing his own coaching skills when he works with his own staff. ❖

1 Please note that we are not suggesting that you need to take on the entire employee-coaching function, obviating the need for external coaches. Hiring an external coach is a great way to accelerate your own leadership development, and at times it may also be more effective or appropriate for the people with whom you work to make use of an external coach. The point here is that incorporating coaching skills and the coaching relationship into your work situation has rich rewards, both professionally and personally.

2 CQ is the Curiosity Quotient, identified by Thomas Friedman, author of *The World Is Flat*, as a significant competitive advantage in our global marketplace.

3 According to a 2001 *Fortune* article, "Asked for a conservative estimate of the monetary payoff from the coaching they got, these managers described an average return of more than \$100,000, or about six times what the coaching had cost their companies." This was the ROI resulting from bringing in outside coaches. Imagine how much the return increases when coaching from within, as you add the benefits that accrue from deepening your relationship with your employees, letting them know they are valued, etc.

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