THE COACHING MANAGER

From “The Coaching Manager” Developing Top Talent In Business (Hunt & Weintraub)

Introduction

You probably know the type: the manager of the group down the hall or someone you happened to meet from another company. When you think about a manager like this, you probably feel admiration and maybe even a bit of jealousy. If you know any coaching managers well, you have probably given a sense of the impact of their styles on their work and on others around them. Everyone seems to want to work for them, but managers like this seem too “touchy-feely” for you. You may dismiss their concerns as being beyond what is necessary for managers to worry about. Even so, you may still wonder: How do they do it? The people from their groups always seem to have important roles in the next new or interesting projects.

This is a portrait of the coaching manager, someone who uses coaching to develop talent in his or her business unit, as seen from the other’s point of view. It is not an exaggeration. We have talked with people like these, and we know they are out there. We also know that they can play critical roles in addressing some of the most important concerns in business today. Regardless of the state of the economy, if you are in business, you need talented people to do their best. In a down market, it may be easier to fill jobs, but it is probably no easier to fill those jobs with the right people and to keep the right people moving ahead, with commitment.

One of those airport conversations between strangers brought this point home to us recently. We happened to bump into a human resource manager from a well-thought-of marketing firm. Obviously needing to talk, and thinking she could grab some free consultation from a couple of tired business school professors, she explained that her firm was hemorrhaging employees despite the fact that the business overall was doing quite well. Their best people were leaving, drawn away in part by opportunities to earn more money but also by another, less tangible influence. Exit interviews revealed that many departing employees, including some of the very best, just didn’t feel that they were learning anything. They went through the same process on very similar projects. They made the same mistakes. They did deliver value for the customer, but over time, they felt as though they were “losing their edge”.

The marketing firm the woman worked for inhabits a tough and highly competitive niche (as do most). Hard work is the norm. There is little time for talk. Once you complete a project, you move on to the next. After all, billable hours can be charged only for services to the client. Everything else is overhead. This woman had asked herself and others whether they could devote at least a bit of time to the development of their employees. Perhaps the whole firm would benefit. “Absolutely not!” she was told. The stockholders want results! Sounds like a painful way to live, doesn’t it? Yet this scenario probably sounds familiar. These very bright people are struggling on behalf of their firm, for the firm’s survival. They are working and living in a “day-to-day” mode. They believe that they don’t have time to stop and think about what they are doing, what they are learning, and how they are developing as “knowledge” workers and as people. They also probably believe that “real development” means classroom education, and that coaching is for the employee with a problem.

Coaching can Help,
For Employees who Want to Learn

We propose an alternative. Over the past 10 years, we have talked about coaching with more than 2,000 practicing managers and entrepreneurs. We could say that we have trained more than 2,000 managers in the practice of coaching, but the reality is, they trained us. When we started this work, we viewed coaching as a rather linear activity in which the manager, serving as coach, provided corrective feedback, ideally in a humane way, to employees who might need to improve their performance. The managers we have worked with have made it clear that effective coaching is much more powerful and useful than merely providing feedback to someone with a performance problem.
Managers, by taking a few simple actions, can create learning discussions that we call coaching dialogues, which can help individuals and organizations move out of the “survival mode” toward individual and organizational growth. In all likelihood, many of the best employees in an organization will respond to such coaching because they will feel that they are learning and growing and that the boss cares enough about them to promote this process.

The managers we interviewed also told us that coaching has helped them evolve as leaders. By talking with their employees through coaching, they have a different view of how their teams are functioning and, rather than try to fix every problem themselves, they spend more time building an organization capable of adapting and competing in challenging times.

In contrast with the more linear view of coaching with which we began, we have also reluctantly come to see that coaching will not always help those individuals who have severe performance problems or are a poor “fit” with their organizations. Human resource professionals sometimes talk about coaching as a panacea for performance problems (Waldroop, 1996). Coaching is probably worth a try when someone’s performance is poor. However, when an employee has severe performance problems, what might be described as “enabling factors” required for coaching to be effective may be absent. The result is that too many managers spend far too much time (their most valuable resource) trying to coach when coaching may not work. In fact, the amount of time spent trying to “correct” one employee far exceeds the amount of time that most managers spend with good, competent employees. One of our premises is that managers will accomplish far more by focusing their coaching efforts on the great majority of talented employees – those who are already effective or who show potential – than on employees with performance problems.
Coaching requires a two-way, fairly committed relationship (note that we don’t say “totally committed”, which wouldn’t be realistic and usually isn’t necessary). The coach and learner have to be able to engage with one another to achieve the goal of learning from – as opposed to rewarding or punishing - the coachee’s performance. Both manager and employee must be ready to take a few risks. The coachee must want to learn and be open to learning from the coach, with a minimum of defensiveness. The coaching manager must be willing to let his or her employees struggle with what they don’t know. Sometimes, in the interest of learning, coachees must be allowed to make mistakes. Coaching is likely to benefit the people who have a desire to become “even better”: those who are engaged and excited about their work, who can take some responsibility for their work, who want feedback and seek it out, who want to talk about their development, and whose goals are at least to a degree aligned with the goals of the business unit or the firm. Coaching sets the stage for personal growth for those who want to grow.
About NBOGroup

The NBOGroup has been conducting leadership development, communication and interpersonal skills training across Asia since 1988. The NBOGroup is one of Asia’s most respected leadership and communication consulting firms, with offices in Hong Kong, Singapore, and with partners in Indonesia, Malaysia and Europe.

Each NBOGroup program is designed to fit the specific learning objectives of our clients, who include many of the Fortune 500 companies. With worldwide experience, our programs and products are tailored for multi-cultural environments.

The NBOGroup employs leading edge tools in our customized engagements the NBOGroup unique online 360° Leadership Survey, and psychometric tools including Dr. Raymond Cattell’s Sixteen Personality Factors & Five Global Factors (16PF). Our executive coaches add value in personalized experience by linking individual personality and behavior to desired performance objectives.

Our trainers emphasize the development of practical competencies, not stereotyped techniques. This approach delivers greater impact, a lasting application by the participant, and a return on investment for the organization.

The NBOGroup offers its clients a total learning resource with the philosophy that our client relationship is “a partnership that continues”. We look forward to the opportunity of working with you.