COACHING FOR CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT:
Helping Others Make the Most of MultiSource Feedback

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Table of Contents

Coaching for Continuous Improvement ... 1
The Coaching Difference ... 2
10 Key Principles ... 3
Helping Others
Make the Most of MultiSource Feedback ... 13
Starting With Experience ... 14
The Initial Contact ... 16
The Coaching Session(s) ... 17
A Five Step Coaching Model
   Step 1: Relate ... 18
   Step 2: Review ... 21
   Step 3: Accept ... 22
   Step 4: Understand ... 25
   Step 5: Apply ... 29
Closing the Session(s) ... 33
Self-Improvement Action Plan (reproducible form) ... 34
The Follow-Up Session(s) ... 35
A Few More Tips ... 39
Putting It All Together ... 41
Words of Wisdom From Experienced Coaches ... 43
Key Learning ... 44
Coaching Log ... 45
Coaching for Continuous Improvement

Coaching has quickly become the most critical process for enhancing learning in competitive organizations. In today's business environments characterized by increasing complexity and rapid change, effective coaching can provide the foundation for continuous development and improvement — necessary for individuals and organizations to survive and prosper.

The overall purpose of coaching is to help others learn, develop, adapt, and grow. It is an empowering process. And, it's best performed by people who care about other people.

There are many terms that describe and characterize good coaches. Among them are: partner, supporter, questionner, listener, facilitator, teacher, challenger, motivator, and ultimately friend.

Good coaches realize that they can't make people do anything. They fully understand that continuous improvement is a journey that each person must decide to take on his/her own. But a coach can encourage people to begin that journey, travel with them for a while, and help them navigate. The following section offers many ideas to help you do that.
The Coaching Difference

It's common to view coaching primarily as a strategy for addressing employee performance problems. From that perspective, the difference between it and "counseling" can seem merely semantical. Coaching for continuous improvement, however, is very different from counseling type approaches. To be successful, coaches — especially those who are also supervisors — must understand this difference ... and act accordingly.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coaching for PROBLEM SOLVING</th>
<th>Coaching for CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRESCRIPTIVE</td>
<td>EMPOWERING</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COACH-DRIVEN</td>
<td>&quot;COACHEE&quot;-DRIVEN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EVENT-ORIENTED</td>
<td>PROCESS-ORIENTED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AUTHORITY-BASED</td>
<td>RELATIONSHIP-BASED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIMITED IND. CHOICE</td>
<td>TOTAL IND. CHOICE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CORRECTION FOCUS</td>
<td>DEVELOPMENT FOCUS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Assume you've asked someone to be your continuous improvement coach. List three expectations you would have of that person:

1.

2.

3.
Coaching for Continuous Improvement
10 Key Principles

1. Make it a partnership.
2. Support your local "coachee."
3. Don't forget who's in charge.
4. Talk less ... listen more.
5. Never supervise.
6. Never, ever take "the monkey."
7. Make the environment right.
8. Pay attention to your behaviors.
9. Don't consider defensiveness offensive.
10. Help them see what's in it for them.

Information about each of these principles is presented on the following pages.
1 Make it a partnership.

What does "partnership" mean to you? What words and characteristics come to mind?

- Coaching is a process in which one individual creates a partnership that enables another to learn, grow, and continually improve. The foundation of such a relationship is mutual trust and respect.

- Growth is maximized in climates based on equality. Peer relationships foster the psychological safety and receptivity necessary for total honesty — a critical component of change and continuous improvement.

- The most important characteristic of any partnership is TRUST. To develop trust:
  - Do what you say you'll do. Make good on your word by keeping appointments and agreements.
  - Build the person's self-esteem through positive reinforcement and recognition.
  - Really listen to the other person — it's the highest compliment you can pay ... and it demonstrates that you're interested in them.
  - Prepare adequately.
  - Be honest and candid in a non-threatening way.
  - Be willing to disclose information about yourself.
  - Maintain total confidentiality.
  - Be consistent in your approach, demeanor, and actions.
Support your local "coachee."

What does "supportive" mean to you? What behaviors would you expect to see from a supportive person?

- The main function of coaching is to enable and encourage others to reach new heights. Good coaches focus on the person before focusing on the performance. They realize that people who are supported feel good about themselves and develop confidence in their ability to control important outcomes in their lives.

- Good coaches spend at least half of their time dealing in supportive behaviors.

- Being supportive does not mean "coating everything with sugar." Sometimes you must challenge people to deal with painful realities. The key is to be candid and honest without being degrading. Most importantly, you must continually communicate your belief that the person can and will achieve the desired results.

- Support starts with empathy — walking in their shoes.

- Don't underestimate the challenges people may face. Support involves acknowledging the difficulties the person is facing: "I can tell this has been difficult for you." Remember that you don't have to agree to understand, but you MUST understand.
3 Don't forget who's in charge.

- Learning, growth, and continuous improvement are self-initiated, voluntary activities. The motivation for such actions cannot be supplied externally — it must come from within the person.

- Even the army can't force you to "be the best that you can be."

- Good coaches concentrate on what the person is doing and needing. They realize the individual has free choice whether or not to commit to change. The coach is there to help make it an informed and encouraged choice.

- Coaches who try to control the process run the risk of becoming so involved in their own agenda that they fail to hear and understand what the person is saying.

To understand this key principle, examine the relationship that exists between a tennis pro and his/her coach: The pro hires the coach. The coach only has the authority the pro allows. The coach works with the pro to help him/her improve and be a winner. The pro continues working with the coach as long as there is perceived benefit. The pro can fire the coach at any time. The coach is the coach, but the pro is in charge.
Talk less ... listen more.

Since coaching is an equal partnership, the coach should talk no more than fifty percent of the time. Making it forty percent is even better.

Asking questions is a good way to start conversations and show your interest in the person. Open-ended questions work best because they can't be answered with one word. Open-ended questions typically start with "how," "what," or "why."

The most important listening tool is paraphrasing — repeating back in your own words what the person said. Paraphrasing typically begins with words such as: "So you're saying that ..." and ends with "is that correct?"

Give your full attention to the speaker's words (verbal communication) and actions (non-verbal communication). Never plan what you'll say next while the person is talking.

Use behaviors that show you're listening. The person will feel better and you'll actually listen better.

How do you know when someone is listening to you? What specifically do they do?
Never supervise.

Taking a supervisory approach to coaching creates an environment of inequality. The relationship becomes one of boss to subordinate rather than partner to partner. This limits openness, restricts comfort levels, and inhibits the person's ability to learn, grow, and adapt to change.

Supervisors who wish to coach their employees for continuous improvement must remember that it's the employee's choice. The supervisor can only offer to help. Whether or not the employee accepts the offer will be based on the strength of their existing relationship.

There are many reasons why employees don't pursue coaching with their supervisors. They include:

- Fear of revealing unknown weaknesses or deficiencies
- Fear of imposed actions and solutions
- Fear that the information will not be kept confidential
- Overall fear of losing control and choice

Supervisors who are given the opportunity to coach employees for continuous improvement must leave their titles and authority at the door.
Never, ever take "the monkey."

- Don't take responsibility for someone else's continuous improvement. If you assume responsibility, they become non-responsible. And that can create dependency and inhibit growth.

- Your job is to help them think it through, talk it through, and follow it through. The operative words are "help them."

- You're only responsible for your part of the coaching partnership. If you have to carry all the weight, you're really not partners.

- Be careful about what you agree to do. You're there to listen, talk, and sometimes advise. The real work is theirs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Helping Someone Do Something</th>
<th>Doing It For Them</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Builds Ability</td>
<td>Stifles Ability</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fosters Growth</td>
<td>Inhibits Growth</td>
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</tbody>
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Give a man a fish and you've fed him for a day.
Teach him how to fish and you've fed him for A LIFETIME!
7 Make the environment right.

- A proper environment can contribute to a positive and productive meeting. Ask where the person would feel most comfortable meeting. Suggest a convenient location that offers appropriate privacy.

- Minimize physical barriers such as desks and tables. Chairs of the same kind — placed side by side — are preferable.

- Move away from distracting room adornments and windows. Shut the door, have your calls held, and turn off those darn cell phones.

- Make sure the room is acceptable for both of you before starting the meeting. If either of you is uncomfortable or distracted, MOVE.

8 Pay attention to your behaviors.

List five behaviors a coach could exhibit that you would find bothersome or distracting:

1. 
2. 
3. 
4. 
5. 
9 Don't consider defensiveness offensive.

- In effective coaching, the individual is encouraged to express his/her feelings. Emotional responses are clues that can help the coach understand the person's state of mind. And, they serve as "red flags" — pinpointing psychological obstacles that must be overcome. Good coaches not only encourage expressions of feelings, they also probe for them: "Can you tell me what you're feeling right now?" "How does that make you feel?"

- When a person experiences failure, or perceives a threat to their self-esteem and well-being, they tend to employ coping responses to reduce the intensity of the threat. These responses will typically take one of two paths: problem solving or emotion dumping. The problem solving path is chosen when the person believes they have control of the outcome. The mindset here is to "find what's broken and fix it." The emotion dumping path is taken when the person feels they have no control over the outcome. Overwhelming frustration can produce defensive behaviors such as anger, denial, resentment, tears, silence, and a myriad of excuses.

- Good coaches never assume that emotional responses are directed at them personally. They understand that those behaviors are indicative of people trying to deal with difficult situations. The coach should help people cope by: 1) encouraging them to express their feelings, 2) acknowledging those feelings, 3) uncovering the perceived threat, 4) helping them identify those elements they do control, and 5) rebuilding their self-esteem by expressing confidence in their ability to deal with the issue.
Help them see what's in it for them.

The level of an individual's motivation is directly proportional to their belief that expended effort will lead to outcomes they value and desire.

A coach can help the person see what's in it for them by asking two simple questions:

"What are the two most important benefits of continuous improvement for you?"
"How important are those for you?"

To point out the importance and benefits of continuous improvement, try focusing on the person's activities away from the job. Let's say they golf, bowl, or play tennis. Ask if they try to do better each time they play. Then ask "why?"