

Coaching That Counts

by Estienne de Beer

Coaching is a profound leadership mindset, but you have to believe in it first. Andrew Wood explains the big picture as follows: "Leadership is not a right of passage, or at least it shouldn't be. Leadership is a state of mind. A philosophy. An attitude. Understanding this, you can recognize and develop the key traits that will enhance and improve your personal capacity for leadership." Great leaders touch the lives of their followers through coaching. The key to consistent business success is to understand that people come before spreadsheets. The personal growth and coaching of their employees is put on top of the priority list and soon the results on the spreadsheets will follow.



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When you hear the word "coach", what comes first into your mind? Do you picture a sports team with someone shouting out directions? Or perhaps a frowning manager pacing to and fro and calling out the names of the players? Coaching is no longer reserved for sports teams; it is now one of the key concepts in leadership and management. So why has coaching become so popular in the business world?

Coaching levels the playing field.

Coaching is one of the six emotional leadership styles proposed by Daniel Goleman. Moreover, it is a behaviour or role that leaders enforce in the context of situational leadership. As a leadership style, coaching is used when the members of a group or team are competent and motivated, but do not have an idea of the long-term goals of an organization. This involves two levels of coaching: team and individual. Team coaching makes members work together. In a group of individuals, not everyone may have nor share the same level of competence and commitment to a goal. A group may be a mix of highly competent and moderately competent members with varying levels of commitment. These differences can cause friction among the members. The coaching leader helps the members level their expectations. Also, the coaching leader manages differing perspectives so that the common goal succeeds over personal goals and interests. In a big organization, leaders need to align the staffs' personal interests and goals with that of the organization so that long-term direction and strategy can be pursued.

Coaching builds up confidence and competence.

To take any company or team to the top, you can't treat employees as digits. That is why I dislike the term "human resources" ... it is expendable. But not a "human asset" approach. This means that in both theory and practice, people come before projects. You will never reap the right kind of financial numbers until you truly invest in the coaching of your people. This is the ultimate competitive advantage in the business world. Individual coaching is an example of situational leadership at work. It aims to mentor one-on-one building up the confidence of team members by affirming excellent performance and behaviour during regular feedbacks; and increase competence by helping the individual assess his/her strengths and weaknesses towards career planning and professional development. Depending on the individual's level of competence and commitment, a leader may exercise more coaching behaviour for the less-experienced members. Usually, this happens in the case of new employees. The manager gives more defined tasks and holds regular feedbacks for the new staff, and gradually lessens the amount of coaching, directing, and supporting roles to favour delegating as competence and confidence increase.

Coaching promotes individual and team excellence.

Excellence is a product of habitual good practice over a period of time. The regularity of meetings and constructive feedback is important in establishing these habits of excellence. Employees catch the habit of constantly assessing themselves for their strengths and areas for improvement that they themselves perceive what knowledge, skills, and attitudes they need to acquire to attain team goals. In the process, they attain individual excellence as well. An example is in the case of a musical orchestra: each member plays a different instrument. In order to achieve harmony of music from the different instruments, members will polish their part in the musical piece, aside from practicing as an ensemble. Consequently, they improve individually as an instrument player.

Coaching develops high commitment to common goals.

A coaching leader balances the attainment of immediate targets with long-term goals towards the vision of an organization. As mentioned earlier, with the alignment of personal goals with organizational or team goals, personal interests are kept in harmony. By constantly communicating the vision through formal and informal conversations, the members are inspired and motivated. Setting short-term team goals aligned with organizational goals; and making an action plan to attain these goals

can help sustain the increased motivation and commitment to common goals of the team.

Coaching produces valuable leaders.

Leadership by example is most crucial in coaching. Coaching leaders lose credibility when they cannot practice what they preach. This means that coaching leaders should be well organized, highly competent in their field, communicates openly and encourages feedback, and has a clear understanding of the organization's vision-mission-goals. By vicarious and purposeful learning, team members catch the same good practices and attitudes from the coaching leader, turning them into coaching leaders themselves. If team members experience good coaching, they are most likely to do the same things when entrusted with formal management roles.

Some words of caution though: coaching is just one of the styles of leadership. It can be done in combination with the other five emotional leadership styles depending on the profile of the emerging team. Moreover, coaching as a leadership style requires that you are physically, emotionally, and mentally fit most of the time since it involves two levels of coaching: the individual and the team. Your team members expect you to be the last one to give up or bail out in any situation especially during times of crises. A leader must be conscious that coaching entails investing time on each individual, and on the whole team. Moreover, that the responsibilities are greater since while you are coaching members, you are also developing future leaders as well.

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