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Coaching without authority: How to coach your peers or your boss

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Because coaching is not dependent upon formal power over the person you are coaching, it is possible to effectively coach someone who does not report to you—an indirect report, peer or, in some cases, even your boss. Why would you want to do this? Two obvious reasons come to mind: 1) you see this person struggling with a challenge and you believe you can help them gain the insight, the ability or the motivation they need to succeed, and 2) your effectiveness or the effectiveness of your team or your organization will be enhanced by the development of this person.

So, should you decide you are going to coach such a person, what are the critical factors to keep in mind?

First, pay careful attention to the nature of the relationship.

Does an agreement exist between the parties that coaching can even occur? In most organizations, there is a formal or informal understanding that people will provide coaching to their direct reports. But that same understanding exists much less frequently with respect to coaching peers and bosses. If the 'coaching agreement' is unclear, it is wise to clarify the situation: does the person want coaching from you and, if so, what form will it take? Coaching in the absence of an agreement between the parties is likely to receive the same kind of warm welcome that you might expect should you decide to coach your spouse on his or her driving technique or housecleaning practices!

DOES TRUST ALREADY EXIST?

It is also important to identify the level of trust and the depth of communication that currently exist between the parties. In truth, the relationship between coach and coachee is the pipeline through which all your coaching flows. The bigger and clearer the pipeline, the more effective all your coaching activities will be. If the relationship is not yet at the place where there is a fair amount of trust, this is the first place to go to work. Building the coaching relationship is done by actively seeking to establish rapport and communicate respect over the course of your interactions with the potential coachee. Some examples of how you might do this include using face-to-face contact, giving the person your full attention, admitting mistakes, sharing personal information, seeking first to understand by asking questions and carefully listening, and sharing your enthusiasm for what you are doing.

Building the coaching relationship is done by establishing rapport and communicating respect.

Another critical part of the relationship is the level of service you have provided to the individual over time. If you have consistently delivered timely, relevant, high-quality on-the-job performance, the coachee is much more likely to be open to receiving coaching from you. If not, they are more likely to think, “thanks for the feedback, but why don’t you focus on getting your own house in order first?” And who could blame them?

CHOOSE EFFECTIVE STYLES OF COMMUNICATION

Second, to improve the chances of success when coaching laterally or upward choose styles of communication less likely to create resistance from the coachee. While all of the usual communication styles are available (consulting, teaching, mentoring, and confronting) the reality is that certain styles tend to evoke more resistance. Consulting (asking and listening) tends to result in very little resistance because of its inherently highly respectful nature. Teaching and mentoring (feedback and advice) may evoke a little more resistance because, quite frankly, most of us prefer to figure things out

for ourselves. And—no surprise—confronting (stating that something has to change) usually leads to massive resistance and potentially even more serious consequences. You will want to use a confronting communication style cautiously!

And so when coaching laterally or upward, the communication styles you will lean on most heavily are the three that will receive the least resistance. The first is Consulting, in which you essentially act as a focused sounding board for the coachee. Consulting might be used when you assist a peer to gain understanding about the nature of a problem by asking them clarifying questions and listening while they reflect on what really is going on. The second and third styles to use are Teaching and Mentoring, or more specifically, the core skill in both, which is giving specific, relevant feedback. Although feedback can reinforce—here’s what you want to keep doing—or correct—here’s what you may consider changing—in the case of feedback delivered to a peer or a boss we recommend relying primarily upon reinforcement. After all, people rarely mind hearing about what they do well. You might say something like, “Kathy, thank you for sharing that information with me. It really makes it much easier for me to target the efforts of my team when I understand what it is that matters most as we bring this initiative online.”

ASK FOR FEEDBACK

Finally, consider building into the coaching process an opportunity for the coachee to provide feedback and coaching to you regarding your coaching effectiveness. It will help develop the relationship and build trust. This feedback process will also provide an opportunity for you to collect valuable information on how to tailor your coaching and communication style to this particular person. And it will give you a terrific opportunity to demonstrate ‘coachability’ as you ask for the feedback, listen receptively, thank the person for that feedback, and use the feedback to improve. While this might feel risky to some, in truth, it’s the same risk you’re asking of the person you are planning to coach.

Does this mean that you should throw all of these guidelines out the window when it comes to the coaching of a direct report? Not at all. When coaching a direct report these guidelines will still be helpful. But when coaching a peer or your boss these guidelines become essential.

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