

OCTOBER 2011



Relationships matter: Thoughtful coaching

BY SANDRA STARK, PERFORMANCE COACHING PRINCIPAL

What are the most potent factors in high performance? Ability. Desire. Coaching.

What can undermine ability and desire? Bad or non-existent coaching.

Let's start with the obvious: people are complex and they get to where they want to go in a variety of individual ways. Choosing goals and deciding where to put one's energy is a very personal choice. This does not change once people join organizations ... each person will maintain their own beliefs, habits and goals.

If a manager's job is to create synergy and progress, in a way that satisfies the person and the organization, then that manager has to find a common path while paradoxically respecting significant differences. Mostly, in order to follow a common path together, people need a competent guide and inspiration; especially if what they have to do is hard, challenging, repetitive, long, risky, requiring self sacrifice, etc. The guide needs to:

- › Know the path and clear the path
- › Respect the uniqueness and complexity of the person making the effort
- › Imbue the goal with meaning.

So it requires more than just focusing on results. It requires someone who is focused on performance. It requires some thoughtful coaching.

Focusing on performance is a far more satisfying preoccupation anyway. Coaching at its heart is focused on improved performance. And what does it take to get to a higher level of performance? It takes commitment and a focus on results. So by extension good coaches are focused on building commitment and getting results as their end goal. Many coaches, business and sport alike, have the focus on results down pat. Commitment? That's another story. Commitment resides within the performer and it is a sensitive instrument that fluctuates relative to a variety of environmental factors. In a work setting, the most powerful factor is the relationship the person has with their immediate supervisor.

What if growth and development was expected—as in sport. What if managers in the organization created a relationship with their direct reports that facilitated opportunities for growth and development?

There are many kinds of associations one can have with an employee: manager, supervisor, boss, leader, coach. Have you thought about these words as relationships rather than positions? Each of them has their own linguistic lean that indicates the type of interactions that will ensue from such a role. When you think about your own work environment what relationship(s) do you want to have with your people? Each has its own time and place. But as an overarching relationship—what will bring the most benefit to the employee and the organization and therefore you?

What if growth and development was expected—as in sport. What if most managers in the organization created a relationship with their direct reports that facilitated opportunities for growth and development? Would it make difference? Would it make a big enough difference?

Well let's think about what it would look like: What problems it would solve? What effect it would have on the bottom line? And of course most importantly, if people are actually going to do it, what's in it for me?

WHAT WOULD IT LOOK LIKE? You would see a lot more interaction between levels that was specifically focused on providing attention in the form of feedback, listening, and recognition. It would be the company norm to have weekly interactions of a coaching nature that provided input into the employee's understanding and reinforcement of how they were doing, who cared, what they needed to work on next, and how much appreciation existed for their current efforts. With most employees this is easy to determine, could be said in a very few minutes—and usually goes unstated.

WHAT PROBLEMS WOULD IT SOLVE? First it solves the age-old problem of “does anybody care”? The answer is yes. More to the point I am going to regularly hear about how I'm doing and why it matters. So I better be on my game. Because this person is watching, cares about how I'm doing and is trying to help me get better. He/she is committed to my improvement and I better do the same.

People work harder when their work/ effort is going to be noticed, commented on and appreciated. That's just the way we respond as human beings. We will work much harder for someone who is on our side and noticing our contribution, someone who appears to be focused on developing our potential. So performance levels will be higher and, more importantly, will become consistent at a much higher level.

The levels of performance we see in sport, particularly Olympic sport (where the rewards for high performance are very few and the effort is herculean), would not occur without coaching. Very few people could achieve what they do in sport without the hand of a good coach guiding and pushing when required.

WHAT EFFECT WOULD IT HAVE ON THE BOTTOM LINE? Many factors go into achieving a large corporate goal. We can't control all of them. As managers you want to eliminate the execution factor as a reason to miss the goal while increasing the probability that you will hit the ball out of the park. And there is so much personal satisfaction in hitting the ball out of the park for everyone. So it is imperative that all people in the company are on board and working toward the same goal. And the only person who can make that goal come alive for each employee is his or her immediate manager. Otherwise goals become empty words on a poster.

SO, WHAT'S THE GOAL? If you have tremendous clarity on the goal and you are paying attention to the people who have to make it happen in ways that enhance or improve their contribution toward that goal—what's the only thing that can happen? The same result that occurs with teams and athletes who are effectively coached ... you move up in the rankings. So instead of being in the top ten, you are now in the top five.

As a manager you want to eliminate execution as a reason to miss the goal while increasing the probability that you will hit the ball out of the park.

WHAT'S IN IT FOR YOU? Depends on your personality.

If ... you are motivated by feeling connected to people and helping others grow then coaching is the ideal style of management for you.

If ... you like to feel secure that you have a committed work group who will go the extra mile when the going gets tough and back you up then, likewise, coaching is the ideal style for you.

If ... you like to have competitive people who are motivated by beating the targets and disappointed when results aren't hit then coaching is the ideal style for you.

If ... you are somewhat introverted and wish people would play their role and execute the plan then coaching is the ideal style for you.

Should I go on? There are very few desirable parameters for a manager/employee relationship that effective coaching would not address.

Coaching is no more time consuming than other styles of management. It's a mind set. One does begin to feel connected to and invested in how others perform however. So it does make it harder to stay detached from people. Paradoxically one does become more objective and observant—because now you are helping someone grow. And you will definitely begin to look at people through a different lens. There are a few ways to make work meaningful and rewarding beyond the paycheck—this is one of them.

Copyright © 2013 Performance Coaching Inc. All rights reserved. We welcome your comments on this article. Please send them to info@performancecoaching.ca. Learn more at www.performancecoaching.ca.