

# Employee Coaching: The Way to Gain Commitment, Not Just Compliance

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In our management and supervisory workshops around the world, the questions that are raised regarding employees are generally the same. The specific problems that are presented may vary, but inevitably managers begin with, “I have an employee who...” Whether they have employees who are continually late, not performing up to standard, or not behaving like team players, managers are faced with the dilemma of how to change unacceptable performance. Their questions relate to finding ways to resolve the problems while creating the least amount of disruption to the workflow.

Over the past two decades, managers have been told to focus on the process of progressive discipline and performance appraisal as the two means of improving poor performance. Progressive discipline typically follows the steps of verbal counseling, written warnings, sanctions, and, finally, termination if the behavior does not improve. Although progressive discipline does succeed in protecting the employer from unwarranted liability resulting from discrimination charges and lawsuits, it fails to bring about the kind of behavioral change that moves problem employees, or employees with problems, into fully functioning, committed team members. Instead, it often encourages resentful compliance while failing to address the real issues at hand. The problem with progressive discipline is that it is seen as just that—discipline.

Performance appraisals are also negative experiences for most employees. Just the term *appraisal* indicates that it is more evaluative and judgmental than developmental. Performance appraisals look back on past performance, but only in very small ways focus employees on future action or behavioral change. Like progressive discipline, appraisals can create compliant employees who will do whatever it takes to achieve the highest rating on the scale, as opposed to being truly effective at their jobs. Although most managers think that performance appraisal is about development, employees perceive it as similar to receiving a report card. Essentially, in both progressive discipline and performance appraisal, you see change because employees are fearful of consequences. These two processes are management tools—they don’t truly lead people toward self-empowered behaviors. Employees may behave properly while they are being closely managed, but the real goal for managers is to have employees generate positive behaviors and self-correct even when no one is looking.

## **KNOW WHAT MOTIVATES TODAY’S WORKFORCE**

We realize now that compliant employees may get the job done, but committed ones do it better. They make greater contributions to the organization and are more productive, more creative, and, in general, more fun to work with. Think about someone who managed you using an autocratic leadership style. Sure, you would salute, but your performance was most likely nowhere near what it was when you reported to someone to whom you felt committed.

So what's the difference between the leader who gains commitment and the one who only gains compliance? It's simple. Coaching. The most effective leaders we know see themselves not as managers or supervisors, but as coaches. Today's workforce is different from that of the 1950's, '60's, and '70's. Workers then wanted what they missed growing up—security. Many of those employees were products of the Depression and two world wars. Company loyalty, a steady paycheck, and a quasi-interesting work were all that were necessary to gain their commitment. Managers of these employees could manage employees because these employees would manage themselves in an attempt to retain security.

We now have a new generation of workers who grew up knowing prosperity as opposed to poverty. However, the notion of job security is not within their reality. With plant closings, layoffs, and turbulent economic times, these employees do not embrace the same quid pro quo as their parents. Attaining a sense of personal (as opposed to financial) well-being is a prime motivating factor. Today's workers feel that in exchange for coming to work, they should be stimulated, challenged, and recognized for their efforts.

In order to be committed, these workers need to be led, not managed. This makes the role of manager even more challenging than in the past. In addition to managing the function, managers must now also lead their staffs. They must move from seeing themselves as simply managers toward seeing themselves as managers, leaders, and coaches.

There is so much in the business literature today on leadership that we won't go into that subject here. Instead, we suggest that you read the work of Kotter, Kouzes, and Posner, or Peters and Austin on the topic of leadership from management. What there isn't much out on, however, is coaching.

## **COACHING EMPLOYEES TO ALTER BEHAVIOR**

Coaching enables employees to see the alternative behaviors to what they are now doing. The feedback that is the essential part of coaching, along with goal setting, gives employees something concrete to be committed to and provides a road map by which they can guide their behavior.

Coaching does not take the place of progressive discipline and performance appraisal, because organizations still need to protect themselves from unwarranted liability. Instead, coaching is a prelude to progressive discipline; when coaching is done properly it obviates the necessity for discipline. Think of how an athletic coach functions—observing behavior, providing feedback, and encouraging players to their best efforts. Can you imagine Tommy Lasorda waiting until the last game of the season to give his players feedback? No way—at the end of each game, performance is reviewed and players are given suggestions for improving their game. Players go into the next game knowing what to do differently. Managers who wait until formal performance review time to discuss behavior and performance are missing valuable opportunities to improve good or bad performance, to stimulate workers, to challenge, and to motivate.

The essential ingredient for building leader-follower relationships, which enable the employee to hear the coaching suggestions, is trust. Trust means that the employee believes that the leader is providing coaching for the purpose of truly developing him or her and not just as a means of getting a job done. This necessitates that coaching be done in a nonjudgmental context, in a setting other than progressive discipline or performance review time.

## **Characteristics of Effective Managers / Coaches**

We routinely ask participants in our leadership programs about the characteristics of managers they have had who really motivated them to do their best work. Here are some of the attributes that were cited:

- Took time to listen to me.
- Saw me as a person, not just an employee.
- Cared about me personally and helped if I had personal problems.
- Set a good example.
- Let me know I could do more than I thought I was capable of—stretched me.
- Never pulled rank—rolled up his or her sleeves and pitched in.
- Didn't keep me in the dark—let me know what was going on.
- Praised me for a job well done and let me know in a straightforward manner when I didn't do a job well.

How well do you do those things that employees report commit them to the task at hand and to their leaders? The coaching inventory and score sheet at Exhibit 1 will help you determine the extent to which you display coaching behavior.

Not every performance problem can be resolved with coaching. Sometimes it takes training. A simple rule of thumb to use in determining the right thing to do is to ask, "Could this employee do the job if his or her life depended on it?" If the answer is no, then training is needed. If the answer is yes, then all of the training in the world won't help. It's a motivational problem, and coaching is the key to improving performance. The question then is, "Why isn't this employee doing the job for which he or she is qualified?" The only one way to find the answer is to talk to the employee about the problem. This employee must be coached through whatever is impeding performance.

Here is where many leaders reach an impasse. They seem afraid to approach the employee on a personal basis. We hear comments like, "But they'll think I'm prying," or "They should take care of their own problems outside the office." Then there's always the old "Familiarity breeds contempt" school of management. The fact is, 99 percent of employees appreciate and respond to managers who take a personal interest in their welfare. You can open your conversations with, "You know, Jim, your work hasn't been up to it's usual high standards lately. I'm wondering if we can talk about the reason for this. I'm concerned about you." Jim might open up about either a personal or work-related problem that is getting in his way that you didn't know about. Or, Jim might not want to talk about it, but your concern will be enough to have him look at the problem and resolve it himself. In most cases, the risk of taking a personal approach is worth the potential profit.

## **DEVELOP A COACHING PLAN**

Coaching is a process, not a one-shot deal. Coaching sessions with employees usually take place over several weeks. The initial session is to identify the problem behavior, elicit input from the employee, and provide specific coaching suggestions. Then, over the course of the next few weeks, you observe performance, providing immediate feedback (both positive and negative) as appropriate. Within two to three weeks, sit down with the

employee again and let him or her know your perception of how things are going and ask the employee to tell you how he or she feels things are going. Ask the employee whether there is something you can do to assure his or her success. If necessary, redirect the employee toward appropriate behaviors and repeat the cycle until the behavior meets your expectations.

We find it helpful to provide the employee with a written coaching plan. This is not for the purpose of documentation, but rather to enable the employee to refer back to the specific steps that must be taken in order to be effective on the job. Coaching plans are written in a positive, upbeat manner. Start out by thanking the employee for his or her cooperation and indicating your confidence in his or her ability to successfully achieve the behavioral changes required. Next, make suggestions that include identification of the problem behavior and appropriate alternative behaviors. For example, you might write:

Cathy, I appreciate your willingness to address the performance issues we discussed today. I have every confidence that you can and will succeed in making the changes needed to assure your success on the job. So that you can refer back to them as you practice new behaviors, I am summarizing the items we discussed.

1. Instead of waiting until the deadline is past because others haven't provided you with the information that you need to prepare the report, come to me as soon as you know that you are in jeopardy of missing the deadline and ask for my assistance in securing the information. I'm happy to help in whatever way possible.
2. It may be that your overall effectiveness is impeded by the fact that you keep your nose to the grindstone so much that you haven't developed the relationships necessary to help you through the rough spots. Take time out of your work schedule to engage in casual conversation with people, have lunch with them, and let them get to know more about who you are as a person. This will help in gaining the long-term cooperation of others.
3. It appears that at times you are hesitant to remind others that deadlines are near and to pursue people for the information that you need. It would be helpful if you would be more assertive in your interactions with others. This includes letting people know what you need from them, when you need it, and how you feel when they don't cooperate. I think an assertiveness course may help, so why don't we both look for one and get you enrolled by the end of the quarter.

A typical coaching plan has no more than three to five specific suggestions for improvement. It does no good to have a laundry list of suggestions, which will overwhelm and frustrate the employee. Keep your suggestions to a minimum, and use ongoing coaching as the means of assuring improved performance.

### **Suggestions for Becoming an Effective Coach**

Think about behaviors, not characteristics. Instead of using characteristics to describe employee problem areas (e.g., lazy, slow, bad attitude, not a team player), use descriptive behaviors. Replace "lazy" with "doesn't perform duties in a timely fashion, misses deadlines, does not respond quickly to changing priorities." Or let the employee who doesn't act in the best interest of the team know that he or she "doesn't pitch in to help others when time is available and help is needed." Go from "bad attitude" to "shows unwillingness to support management decisions that he or she may not agree with." Just this simple method of letting the employee know the specific behavior that is creating the problem, as opposed to merely stating that he or she is creating the problem, can let the employee know that you are not being critical or judgmental. In essence, you are separating the act from the actor. It also provides the employee with a good idea of what behavior must be changed and worked on.

If you find yourself having difficulty differentiating behaviors from characteristics, use the video camera approach. Pretend that you have a video camera focused on this employee when he or she is behaving inappropriately (or appropriately). What is it that you see through the eyes of the camera?

*Include appropriate alternative behaviors in all coaching sessions.* Once you have the behavior in mind that you want to correct, use the video camera approach to help you describe for the employee what the picture would look like if he or she were doing things right. When you say an employee has a good attitude, what does that mean? Turn the camera on and describe what this person is doing. An employee cannot be expected to change behaviors if you don't inform him or her of what behavior is appropriate. "But he or she should know," is the refrain we hear most often. Obviously, he or she doesn't know or he or she would be performing appropriately. It doesn't stop here, though. Once you've described the appropriate alternative behavior, observe performance and step in as necessary. Tom Peters, in his work on situational leadership, talks about the "leave alone zap." You give feedback, leave employees alone and zap them when you discover they're doing something wrong. It is critical to assuring success that you hang around and watch employees as they attempt to make behavioral changes and intercede when it is clear they are going down the wrong path.

*Factor yourself into the problem.* When an employee is having problems with his or her work, the very first question to ask yourself is, "What am I doing wrong? How do I contribute to this problem?" All too often managers begin with the assumption that the problem lies with the employee's lack of capability, when in fact the manager has failed to provide the proper guidance, support, information, or training. Employees tell us all the time that they'd be happy to do what the boss wants, if only the boss would articulate it. If you can be honest with yourself and determine how you may have created the problem or perpetuated it, you can approach the employee in a positive fashion, shouldering your share of the responsibility. In our work coaching leaders, we often see problem managers who have created problem employees.

*Coach on a regular, not yearly basis.* The one complaint we hear consistently from employees about their managers is that they were surprised when they received their yearly performance reviews. This is also a factor that contributes significantly to lack of motivation and commitment. Good coaches provide regular, ongoing feedback—both good and bad. The absolutely best time to coach is as the behavior is occurring, if it can be done discreetly and in private. If you can provide feedback as employees are engaging in the behavior, they can immediately see what you're talking about and implement the suggested changes. As people try out new behaviors, there will be new coaching opportunities. Look for these and use them as just that—opportunities for feedback and to renew the employee's commitment to get results. Avoid the tendency to punish someone when he or she is having difficulty trying out a new behavior or when things are actually falling apart. In short, let employees know continually where they stand and what is expected of them. A rule of thumb for performance reviews is that nothing should be discussed or written that the employee hasn't heard about already. It is simply not fair to include any items that haven't been discussed with the employee, thereby not giving the employee an opportunity to improve in that area.

*Use positive reinforcement to shape behavior.* Casino operators understand how to shape our behavior—how else could they get us to put quarter after quarter into a machine that pays off only intermittently? Coaches use the same principle to extract the best from each employee. There is no better way to get employees to meet your expectations than to let them know when they have succeeded in achieving those expectations. The caveat here is to be as specific as possible. It does no good to tell an employee he or she is “doing a good job lately”—this is much too general. Tell an employee that you appreciate the fact that the quarterly reports have been on time and accurate. Or when an employee who is typically late arrives on time, let him or her know that you noticed and appreciate it.

Avoid the tendency to attach implied criticism to the reinforcement. An example of this is. “You did a fine job on the status report this week, it was much better than the last few times.” Positive reinforcement doesn’t have to occur every time a job is completed, but if it is provided intermittently for appropriate or approximate behaviors, you will ensure the repetition of that behavior in the future. Catch people in the act of doing something right and reinforce it.

*You are not others and others are not you.* Another pitfall many leaders fall into is expecting others to do things as they themselves would. We ran into an Indonesian manager who asked the question, “Why can’t these employees do things as I did when I was in their shoes?” The obvious answer is that his technical excellence is the reason he was made a leader. Although it may be disappointing when others don’t do things in precisely the same fashion as you would, the fact is that you delegate the project and the process. You encourage people to do it the way that they do things best, as long as they get the result that you need and don’t make mistakes that have a negative impact on the work of others.

*Let people make incremental changes.* All too often we want people to make so many changes that it’s difficult for them to comprehend the enormity of the task. Identify simple ways in which employees can make behavioral changes and feed them only one or two at a time. Begin with something that the employee can do successfully. Don’t ask the employee who is fearful of speaking in front of groups to address 1,000 people at the next shareholder meeting. Pick out the most crucial changes required and concentrate on those before moving on to others. Allow the employee to experience success in these changes and use this success as a jumping-off place for future change. Success tends to breed more success. Self-confidence increases and allows people to believe that they are capable of greater challenges. Take a rubber band and stretch it, and the molecules actually change such that the rubber band will never be the same again. Of course you have to take care not to stretch it too much or it will break. People can be stretched and changed too, provided they are treated with care and not stretched to their breaking points.

So save your manager’s hat for the tasks at hand and put on your coaching cap when dealing with employees. It’s an illusion to think you manage anyone anyway. People manage themselves when they are provided with the feedback needed to motivate and challenge them. Picture yourself as the coach of your departmental team and give the players all of the information and tools they need to succeed. Do all employees respond positively to coaching? No, but through the process you’ve built a relationship with the employee that enables both you and the employee to know when it’s time to make a job change (either within or outside of the organization). The employee will know that you have his or her best

interest in mind and that you've cared enough to try to assure job success. We've had employees who went through the coaching process and eventually left the organization but returned to thank us for taking the time to help. Those employees usually go on to a job for which they are better suited and in which they are happier.

## **RESOURCE LIST**

- J. Kouzes and B. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge* (Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1989).  
J. Kotter, *The leadership Factor* (The Free Press, 1988).  
T. Peters and N. Austin, *A Passion for Excellence* (Warner Books, 1985).

**Exhibit 1. Coaching Inventory**

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Scale:     1 = Almost Always  
           2 = Usually  
           3 = Sometimes  
           4 = Rarely

**To what extent do you:**

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Let people know on a regular, informal basis how they are doing?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Make an effort to provide people with immediate feedback for their performance (both positive and negative)?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Take the time to observe specific behaviors of your employees?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Know the career goals of your employees?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. Take time for casual conversation with your employees?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Know enough about the personal lives of your followers to understand the impact on their work performance?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Feel comfortable disciplining an employee for continued unacceptable performance?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. Feel comfortable personally confronting an employee about behaviors you think are inappropriate or counterproductive?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. Know what each of your employees is most proud of?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. Build individual relationships with your employees?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. Illuminate employees' strengths and weaknesses so that they can see them for themselves?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. Listen to your employees about their feelings, ideas, or concerns?

- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. Assist employees with ways of building on their strengths and improving areas of weakness?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. Feel comfortable acting as an impartial listener to an employee with a personal problem?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 15. Think that your employees believe that you act in their best interest?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 16. Adapt your coaching style to meet the specific skill level and need of your individual employees?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 17. Build strong teams with employees who have complementary strengths?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 18. Set realistic targets and goals for individual employees as well as for your team?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 19. Encourage your employees to take personal and team responsibility for stewardship for getting the entire job done?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 20. Encourage people to use their strengths to compensate for their weaknesses?

\_\_\_\_\_ **TOTAL**

If your score is...

**20 to 30 – You exhibit coaching behavior.** You do a good job of letting people know where they stand, encouraging employees to excel, and building the kinds of relationships that enable you to successfully lead your team.

**31 to 55 – You exhibit moderate coaching behavior.** At times you provide employees with the kind of guidance they want and need, but you are hesitant to confront and delve deeply into the tougher issues and concerns of your people. Make more of an effort to get to know your staff.

**56 to 80 – You exhibit low coaching behavior.** You may be too involved with getting the job done – you may have to stop “doing” so much and start “being” more. Leadership involves knowing the people who report to you on more than a superficial level. Until you do this, you will only be able to manage and not lead.