

COACHING FOR BETTER TEAMWORK

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As leaders we always preach teamwork, but we often excuse ourselves from its practice—and even more often fail to hold people in our organizations accountable for living this value. This inconsistency invites corporate cynicism, undermines credibility, and can sap organizations of their vitality. The failure to uphold espoused values in general—and teamwork in particular—is one of the biggest frustrations in the workplace. In our research, involving thousands of participants at more than thirty large companies, employees rated their manager’s ability to “effectively deal with individuals whose behavior undermines teamwork” dead last among ninety-two elements of effective leadership.

If everyone, including senior executives, acknowledges this challenge, why is it so difficult for leaders to promote change among those whose behavior they can most readily influence—their direct reports?

One reason is that leaders, like most people, want to be liked. Leaders are often afraid that confronting people about poor teamwork or other behavioral shortcomings (as opposed to performance problems) will cause them to be disliked. The paradox is, leaders would be more respected, not less, if they delivered the bad news. Outside consultants often provide behavioral coaching to leaders, and leaders usually appreciate the help. Surveys show that people highly value honest feedback—whether or not the feedback itself is positive.

The nature of the performance-review process itself accounts for much of the problem. Historically, when assessing others, most managers were forced to play the role of judge—and, potentially, executioner. The consultant, by contrast, is usually seen as an objective third party who is providing analysis, suggestions, and feedback gathered from multiple sources. A person receiving bad news from a consultant is more likely to separate the message from the messenger than a person hearing the same news from the manager.

Fortunately, leaders have at their disposal a valuable aid already in place at many leading companies—360-degree feedback. Carefully designed processes that include 360-degree feedback can allow a leader to practice consultative coaching, as opposed to merely exercising personal judgment. The results can be profound—and not just for department heads evaluating their frontline employees. The executive coaching process can help any manager whose work involves personal interaction. In fact, senior management teams at some of the world’s leading companies—American Express, Avon, GE, Netscape, Nortel, Texaco—use 360-degree feedback as part of an overall process to help align corporate values and individual behavior.

Before You Begin

Although this process can improve behavior, it will definitely not solve all performance problems. Before you get started, ask yourself if any of the following conditions prevail. If so, behavioral coaching may be a waste of time.

- *The person you're coaching is not willing to make a sincere effort to change.* Behavioral coaching will work only if the manager you are coaching is willing to make the needed commitment.
- *The person has been written off by the company.* Sometimes organizations are really just documenting a case to get rid of someone. If that's the case, don't bother going through this process.
- *The person lacks the intelligence or functional skills to do the job.* If a manager does not have the capacity or experience required, don't expect behavioral coaching to help.
- *The organization has the wrong mission.* Coaching is a "how to get there" process, not a "where to go" process. If the organization is headed in the wrong direction, behavioral coaching will not make it change course.

Getting Started

On the other hand, if you're dealing with people who have the will and capacity to change their behavior, who are operating in an environment that gives them a chance to change, and who work for an organization that is headed in the right direction, this process will work; the nature of the process itself ensures its success. The approach I recommend involves eight steps:

1. *Identify desired attributes for the manager you are coaching.* You shouldn't have to start from scratch. I generally work with my clients to develop custom leadership profiles, but there are many useful inventories on the market (from Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner, the Center for Creative Leadership, and others) that can be a big help. Once you've determined the behavioral characteristics of a successful manager in a given position—such things as accessibility to colleagues, recognition of others, and listening—ask that manager if he or she agrees that these are the right kind of behaviors. Securing agreement will boost commitment to the process.

2. *Determine who can provide meaningful feedback.* Key stake-holders may include direct reports, peers, customers, suppliers, or members of the management team. Strive for a balanced mix that does not stack the deck for or against the manager, and gain agreement that these are the appropriate reviewers.

3. *Collect feedback.* Assessment is often best handled in a written, anonymous survey, compiled by an outside party into a summary report and given directly to the manager being coached.

4. *Analyze results.* Talk with the manager about the results of his or her peers' feedback. The manager may choose not to disclose individual stakeholders' comments, or even numerical scores. The point is simply to discuss the manager's key strengths and areas for improvement.

5. *Develop an action plan.* The most helpful—and appreciated— outcome of any assessment is specific advice. Developing “alternatives to consider” (rather than mandates) shouldn’t be difficult. If, for example, you asked the manager to suggest four things you could do to be a better listener, you’d probably get a pretty good list— things like don’t interrupt people, paraphrase what they say, make eye contact, and pause five seconds before responding to their remarks. The problem isn’t figuring out what to do; the problem is doing it. Focus on one or two key behaviors and develop a few action steps to improve each.

6. *Have the manager respond to stakeholders.* The manager being reviewed should talk with each member of the review team and collect additional suggestions on how to improve on the key areas targeted for improvement.

7. *Develop an ongoing follow-up process.* Within three or four months conduct a two-to-six-item minisurvey with the original review team. They should be asked whether the manager has become more or less effective in the areas targeted for improvement.

8. *Review results and start again.* If the manager has taken the process seriously, stakeholders almost invariably report improvement. Build on that success by repeating the process quarterly for the next twelve to eighteen months. This type of follow-up will ensure continued progress on initial goals and uncover additional areas for improvement. Stakeholders will appreciate the follow-up—no one minds filling out a focused, two-to-six-item questionnaire if they see positive results. And the manager will benefit from ongoing, targeted steps to improve performance.

Moving Beyond the Basics

You may want some coaching yourself from a trusted colleague, friend, or family member on how to approach the task, but this is not a mysterious process. It requires more discipline than talent, more integrity and commitment than behavioral science expertise. Simply by sitting down with the manager and analyzing the perceptions of his or her colleagues, you will be able to change your relationship with that person. And the person will change, too. Managers who want to improve, who talk to people about ways to improve, solicit feedback, and develop a rigorous follow-up plan, will almost always improve. (Certainly they won’t get worse.) And when people improve, their self-confidence goes up. They keep doing what works, and they keep getting better.

By becoming an effective coach, you can become a more credible leader and an active agent of change. You can help people develop an essential habit for personal or organizational success— follow-through. By delivering what you promise—that is, measuring others on the behaviors and attributes you say you value—you cement the bonds of leadership with your constituents. And by having others follow through on their own progress toward agreed-upon goals, you can help create a more responsive, positive, and cohesive organization.

It may be difficult for leaders to give and receive honest feedback—and to make the time for genuine dialogue. Executive coaching is simple, but not easy. It is just one tool in a total strategy of performance appraisal, compensation, and promotion that can reinforce positive behavioral change. But if you’re serious about your espoused values, shouldn’t you ensure that the managers in your organization demonstrate the values you promote?

This chapter appears in the book:

“Leader to Leader: Enduring Insights on Leadership from the Drucker Foundation’s Award-Winning Journal”, Frances Hesselbein, Paul M. Cohen, eds., 1999, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, pp. 349-354, ISBN 0787947261