

Recruiting Supportive Coaches: A Key to Achieving Positive Behavioral Change

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I have recently completed a research review on the unique challenges and strategies involved in helping successful people get even better. One interesting finding of this research is that successful people are much more likely to accept coaching from those whom they respect and whom they see as successful. Successful people are less likely to value coaching from those whom they do not see as successful. This phenomenon tends to occur even if the content of the coaching from less successful people is very similar.

This point was made even more clearly when Beverly Kaye, Ken Shelton, and I asked great thought leaders and teachers to describe a key event when they learned something that made a significant difference in their lives. This led to our book Learning Journeys. More than half of the respondents described a situation in which they had received coaching from someone that they deeply respected.

In many cases, this coaching did not come from someone in a formal coaching relationship (like a consultant, manager, or teacher). Interestingly enough, most agreed that the same message would not have had much impact if a different person had delivered it. This made us realize that, when dealing with successful people, the source of coaching can be as important as the content of the coaching.

Another clear finding of our literature search is that positive behavioral change is much more likely to last if the individual who is trying to change has a "support group" (or at least "support person") who is assisting in the change process. In order for these supportive coaches to be helpful, there needs to be a "two-way" respect relationship. They need to respect us and we need to respect them.

In helping you achieve a positive, measurable change in behavior, your best coaches will not necessarily be outside experts (like me) who have credentials or training in this field. Your best coaches may often be people that you respect and who impact your life on a daily basis.

A common misconception about coaching is that your coach has to be an "expert" to be helpful. This is not true. A helpful behavioral coach can be anyone that you respect. Your coach can be anyone who observes your behavior on a day-to-day basis. Your coach can be a person that is part of any valuable relationship.

Your spouse, friends, or partners may not be experts on interpersonal behavior, but they may be experts at understanding how your interpersonal behavior impacts them!

They can usually describe the behavior that you need to demonstrate so that you can become more effective (at work) or happier (at home).

Who should your coaches be? In selecting coaches, you may wish to consider the key people who are impacted by your behavior. This list might include your manager, direct reports, colleagues, customers, friends, and family members. A key guideline is: don't ask for their advice if you don't want to hear it! Involve the people who you believe can help you get better.

After determining who you want your coaches to be, it is important to gain their commitment to the coaching process. Have a one-on-one dialogue with each person whom you are going to recruit as a coach.

Ask them if they would be willing to spend a few minutes each month during the next year to help you achieve a positive change in your behavior. When they respond, look closely at their faces; don't just listen to their words. Only involve people who are sincerely willing to try to help you.

Be honest and direct in these dialogues. Let them know that you are going to make a sincere effort to improve. Don't promise that you will succeed. Be realistic—let them know that you will probably "fall off the wagon" during the next year. Let them know that you will be very sensitive to the value of their time in this process.

I have found that the answers to the three simple questions that follow can be great predictors as to their future success in being your coach and in helping you change.

1. Are you willing to "let go" of my past behavior and try to help me change my future behavior?

One of the great mistakes that we make when we try to help others change is to focus on the past, not on the future. How many times have we been "helped" by a spouse, friend, or partner who is able to impress us with their near photographic memory of our previous "sins"? How much does this generally help anyone? None of us can change our past; all we can do is change our future. Focusing on the past can be demoralizing. Focusing on the future can be energizing.

For better or worse, it is often useless to have a dialogue with successful people about what they have done wrong in the past. The successful person, who "receives" the feedback often becomes defensive, denies the feedback, and tries to prove that the sender is "wrong" or "doesn't understand." The "sender" of the feedback may feel awkward, embarrassed, uncomfortable, or even afraid. Successful people tend to resist negative feedback about their past; they almost always appreciate constructive suggestions for their future.

By focusing on the future, the coach can usually "cover the same material" in a much more constructive way. Rather than focusing on "Let's talk about how you made an ass

of yourself in front of the executive team!" the coach can focus on, "Ideas for making more effective executive presentations in the future."

Having your coach focus on the future will make this process a lot more fun (and a lot less painful) for you. Do you really want someone pointing out everything that you have done wrong? Wouldn't you rather work with someone who is willing to "forgive yesterday's sins" and try to help you get better tomorrow?

2. Are you willing to be a supportive coach, not a cynic, critic, or judge?

Successful people tend to respond very well to future-oriented advice that will help them achieve their goals. Successful people tend to resist advice when they feel that they are being judged or manipulated.

Improving an interpersonal relationship involves a two-way effort. If we work hard to change our behavior so that we can have better relationships with others, and we only receive cynicism or criticism, we will generally give up on the process. Why should we work so hard to improve our relationship with people when we feel punished for our efforts?

The person whom you are recruiting to help you needs to understand that your efforts to change behavior (over the next year) will often result in failure. We all have a tendency to revert back to old behavior. The more stressful the situation, the more likely this is to be true. If your coach does not give up on you when you fail in the short run, you will be much more likely to succeed in the long run. If your coach expects you to fail and says, "I knew you could not change," your odds for successful change go down.

The people whom we respect can create either positive or negative self-fulfilling prophecies concerning our behavior. Optimism is a key ingredient in helping people change. If your coaches consistently communicate a belief that "you can do it," you will be much more likely to succeed. If they do not believe that you can change, they may do more harm than good.

3. Will you commit to being honest with me when you give me suggestions for the future?

Coaches who are unwilling to be honest are generally not that helpful. If the coaches are unduly negative, the person being coached may become unnecessarily demoralized. If the coaches are unduly positive, the person being coached may be getting positive reinforcement for negative behavior. Neither option is useful. Just ask your coaches to tell the truth as they see it. Point out that they are the only people in the world who can accurately provide their assessments of your behavior.

In my corporate work, hundreds of my clients have asked their colleagues these questions. The huge majority of people say yes to all three. In some cases, people say

no. Perhaps the relationship has been too strained too long for them to want to fix it. Perhaps they are uncomfortable providing honest suggestions.

Perhaps they are too busy. It doesn't really matter. If they don't want to participate, don't force the issue. Just thank them for their honesty in telling you how they feel. In almost all cases, there will be more than enough people who are willing to help. Work with them.

Following-up With Your Coaches

After recruiting your support group of coaches, ask them for their ideas on how you can improve. This can be done either formally (through 360° feedback) or informally (through merely asking for suggestions for the future).

Identify the one or two behavioral changes that can make the most positive impact. Realize that these behaviors may vary with different groups. Ask them for ongoing suggestions for improvement in these behaviors. Do not promise that you will do everything they say. Do promise to listen to their ideas, to understand their perspective, and to do what you can. Stick with the plan and make sure that you keep following-up.

Results from thousands of people who have followed these steps demonstrate a clear pattern. If you recruit supportive coaches whom you respect, ask them for ongoing suggestions, listen to their ideas, and keep following-up, you will almost always achieve a positive long-term change in your behavior. You will also improve your relationships with the most important people in your world!