

COACHING FOR BUSINESS SUCCESS

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Case History One

Alan is a senior Finance Manager in a large commercial organisation. He runs a team of six, who regard him with a mixture of respect and exasperation; respect because he is so obviously committed to the business and hard-working; exasperation because he rarely trusts them to take on any of the new, interesting work which comes the team's way. In fact, when he does delegate a task, he tends to check up on progress almost on an hourly basis, and has been known to tear up the work when he gets it back. On these occasions, Alan will characteristically take the work home and do it himself over the weekend.

Alan's line manager regards him with the same mixture of respect and exasperation. She knows she can trust him completely to achieve his deadlines, however short the notice. She is, however, very aware of the under-performance of his staff who are unstretched, undeveloped, and a long way from fulfilling their potential for the business.

Alan is currently participating in a Manager Development Programme which includes the opportunity for one-to-one coaching based around psychometric profiling. Before his first coaching session, Alan completed a number of personality questionnaires, which indicated some strong "themes" in his personality. In particular, he seemed to be notably:

- perfectionist, with very high personal standards;
- emotional, feeling his highs and lows very deeply;
- prone to guilt and self-blame;
- impulsive, and inclined to make decisions without much reflection.

During the coaching session, Alan readily recognised these aspects of his personality. The discussion focused on the impact of his style on his commercial effectiveness, and in particular on the extent to which he got the best out of his team. Using questions, the coach helped Alan to identify a specific incident; a delegated task which had "gone wrong" and then to review it in detail, looking wherever possible at the verbatim conversations which had taken place and asking the question "how might you have handled that differently?"

In summary, the learning which emerged from the conversation was as follows:

- Alan's high workload is affecting the quality of his work.
- At an intellectual level, Alan understands the theory and purpose of delegation.
- However, his impulsiveness and workload mean that he delegates without clarity, without specifying outcomes and without agreeing how he will monitor the work.
- His anxiety about the outcome causes him to intervene in a manner which has an overly fussy, critical impact.
- Because of the initial lack of clarity, the finished work is often not quite what is needed. Alan will then typically reject the work, redo it himself, and fail to review with his chastened subordinate what has gone wrong.

Having identified together these important learning points (together with some others about assertiveness and personal health) the coaching discussion moved on to focus on how Alan might operate more effectively in the future. By the end of the session, Alan had put together a plan for action based on establishing some systems and frameworks for managing his team which would:

- guard against his impulsiveness and lack of clarity when delegating;
- involve other team members in the process of monitoring work;
- ensure that work is reviewed properly, and learning maximised.

Principles of Good Coaching

The benefits of the coaching process are well-established, and Alan's story is a good case study of coaching within a particular setting - in this case, coaching provided by a consultant in the context of a Development Programme, using data from a psychometric profile. Whatever the context, good coaching will follow some simple but powerful principles:

It will be rooted in real-life experience (Alan's case study focused on a specific management incident).

The coach will enable the coachee to review the real-life experience, in detail and in depth (in Alan's case this meant reviewing line by line some of the interventions he made during the progress of the incident).

This review will lead to the establishment of some general conclusions or principles (in Alan's case, some significant conclusions about his patterns of behaviour when under pressure, and how these patterns conflicted with what he was trying to achieve as a Manager).

The coach will then help the coachee to generate ideas about how to move forward in relation the issue under review, and to make a plan (Alan identified his need for some structure around the way in which he managed his team, and was able to specify the structures which would be most helpful).

The next coaching session can then focus on reviewing the implementation of the plan, and the coaching cycle begins again (in Alan's case the role of the coach can be taken by his Line Manager once his development programme is finished).

These coaching principles, and the learning cycle which underpins them, have been described academically and at length - by the American educationalist David Kolb, amongst many others, in his book "Experiential Learning" (1975). The principles are, however, quite straightforward and indeed obvious in the sense that most people can relate the learning cycle to their own day-to-day experience, as adults or as children. Ironically, however, in a business setting Managers often fail to coach their staff, and by doing so fail to take opportunities to:

- learn from successes and failures;
- develop the skills and effectiveness of their staff;
- identify business or commercial improvements.

Barriers to Effective Coaching

What gets in the way? Discussion with Managers working in all sorts of organisations produces a list of impediments to proper coaching which is sadly familiar:

"We're too busy to review"

"I'll cover it at the annual appraisal"

"We've got a different culture here. When something goes wrong, we don't review it.
We find out whose fault it was"

"No-one here ever owns up to having any problems"

"I'm not sure I trust my boss enough to have an open and frank discussion with him"

"I know it's a good idea, but it doesn't feel like real work somehow"

Day to Day Coaching

The best Managers, of course, coach their staff continually. They seize opportunities as they come up. They keep it simple. They review, for example, the sales meeting that's just taken place involving a less experienced colleague:

"How do you feel it went?"

"How would you prepare differently for the next meeting?"

"Perhaps we should include Charlotte next time. What do you think?"

....or the first meeting of a new project team

"Jane gave you a hard time. How might you have handled her differently?"

"What kind of conversation do you need with her before the next meeting?"

In coaching their staff in this way, the best Managers will draw upon a fundamental set of skills:

They ask good questions, designed to help the coachee analyse and explore what's happened.

They listen actively to the responses, and probe more deeply into areas of apparent uncertainty or concern.

They give good feedback; objective feedback, based on specific observations, delivered directly and with the purpose of helping the coachee to learn.

Once the issues are agreed, they have a constructive approach to problem-solving, putting forward ideas or advice to help the coachee decide their way forward.

And, perhaps most importantly, they demonstrate a coaching attitude, genuinely wanting to use the review to move the individual and the business forward, rather than to allocate blame for any problem.

How does Coaching compare with other Performance Improvement Methods

What about the outcomes of coaching? Our earlier case study about Alan ended with the creation of an action plan designed to address his unique performance issues. Alan will need to demonstrate the value of his plan by measuring its impact on the output of his team members, and of the team as a whole; and its impact on the multi-skilling and business potential of his staff. A second case study shortly will focus on the improved sales performance of a senior consultant within a multinational firm. In general terms, however, we can compare the outcomes of coaching with the outcomes of two other approaches to improving performance, simply summarised as

TELLING people what you want them to do, and

SHOWING people what you want them to do

Research indicates that, after a three week period, the retention rate of learning gained through Coaching is marginally higher than that of learning gained from Telling or Showing. However, if we extend the study period to three months we find that the retention rate of people who have been coached is far higher than that for people who have been shown what to do, and is five times higher than the retention rate of people who have simply been told what to do.

Good Managers therefore coach in a range of contexts:

informally, as opportunities arise;

more formally, at planned review or appraisal meetings;

in connection with a particular piece of work they have asked the coachee to undertake.

Sometimes, however, the coach is not the Line Manager. The coach may be a trusted colleague from another part of the organisation, or a mentor, or an HR professional. In Alan's case, the coaching was provided by a consultant as part of Alan's involvement in a company wide programme of management development. Our other case study, Alison, also received coaching from a consultant but as part of an individual programme which included several methods for acquiring data about her impact and performance.

Case History Two

Alison manages a consultancy team and as the senior consultant has significant responsibility for generating new business. Her relatively low conversion rate was a source of concern for her Manager, and indeed to Alison who rightly regards herself as technically proficient and could not understand her lack of selling success.

An individualised coaching programme was developed with an external consultant. Alison's first meeting with her coach was a diagnostic discussion designed to identify the issues and agree a process for exploring them. Clearly the nature of Alison's personal impact on others, particularly potential clients, was likely to be an issue. In order to acquire data for a coaching discussion about her impact, Alison agreed to seek 360° feedback from colleagues in the workplace.

Interestingly, the feedback that Alison gained through this process was rather sketchy, and seemed less than frank. At her second meeting, Alison agreed to her coach's suggestion that he should spend a day shadowing her, seeing her in action and gaining first hand data about her style and impact. The shadowing would cover a variety of meetings, and less formal interactions with colleagues.

The shadowing process produced a wealth of data for classic coaching, for review, for direct feedback, and for enabling Alison to plan constructively how to manage herself differently, particularly in sales meetings. In summary, Alison gained the insight that her highly focused, task-centred style had, in some settings, the unintended impact of excessive bluntness or directness. This, together with her natural assertiveness, created the impression of someone who is not much interested in what others have to say, and who will hear only what she wants to hear. This helped her to understand the cautious and less-than-frank response to her request for 360° feedback. More importantly, it helped her to review her approach to her team and to sales meetings, and to agree a plan for action with two main strands:

- to allow her subordinates to become more involved in sales meetings with her, adding value with their different styles and communication skills;

- to moderate her personal style in terms of bluntness and urgency, and demonstrate a willingness to listen and be flexible.

Alison's action plan has proved to be effective, her conversion rate has improved to the point where it is no longer a performance problem. In addition, she now has the chance to work with her team in a much more inclusive and developmental way. Having been well coached, she is likely to be a more effective coach herself.

Alison's case study, and Alan's, are good examples of the business impacts of coaching. In each case, the investment in their development has been rewarded by measurable improvements. A simple process, but a powerful one!

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