

How to create a coaching culture

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Organisations talk about having a coaching culture or a coaching style of management, but how often is this lip-service rather than a fundamental change? David Minchin looks at what it means to have a coaching culture and how to help managers become good coaches.

A coaching culture involves a range of styles and techniques with a directive approach at one end of the spectrum and non-directive at the other. If someone is learning a new job or task and really has no idea of what they should be doing then clearly they need to be giving instructions and shown what to do so a directive approach is needed.

On the other hand, if we take a very experienced salesperson who may be going through a period of poor results a different approach is required. This person will know what to do, so by taking a more non-directive approach with them, asking appropriate questions to get them to explore their previous experience for other ideas, listening to them properly and reinforcing their confidence and ability is more likely to get results.

The non-directive style can also be very effective for the development of people. For example, if someone is unsure about a decision they need to make or how to handle a problem is just giving them your answer the best way? I suppose if the decision was urgent and a high priority then maybe you would have to. However, if it wasn't, how much better for the person's development to ask what they would do and get them to think of other options?

"There needs to be a top down approach to a coaching culture. If the MD doesn't agree or use a coaching style him/herself why should anyone else take it seriously?"

Flexibility is the key within coaching, knowing which style is appropriate to which situation and with which person. The differences can be quite subtle, which is why coaching is a skill involving judgement.

The potential and limitations of managers becoming coaches

Individuals within management positions are in just the right place to become excellent coaches. The majority of managers will hold regular one-to-one meetings with their direct reports. Of course some may not, using all or some of the excuses I've probably thought of using in the past: not enough time, there's no need to meet if everything is going well, a meeting will just lead to a list of moans or complaints etc.

Managers have a great opportunity to make every one-to-one a productive experience. Even if you are hit with someone complaining or moaning about their lot, if you use good questions and listen effectively, at the very least that individual will feel that you are interested. With the right approach an individual is more likely to work out their own solutions or even recognise that sometimes nothing can be done about aspects of the job that are boring or repetitive.

There are some limitations however:

- For those managers that feel the need to show authority or that they are the boss all the time the non-directive style can appear soft or weak
- When you mention coaching to some managers they will immediately think of football coaching or some other sport, which would normally be very directive
- A coach is not a 'one trick pony', therefore, practice at coaching is required just like any other skill and some would find this challenging. Telling people what to do can be seen as quicker and more effective, which of course it may be, but only in the very short term.
- There needs to be a top down approach to a coaching culture. If the MD doesn't agree or use a coaching style him/herself why should anyone else take it seriously?

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What do managers need to do to become effective coaches?

Firstly, managers need to understand the purpose and process behind coaching. Coaching is often portrayed as a 'pink and fluffy' approach to managing when in fact it can be very powerful and should be goal or objective driven.

Some training should be provided which will include a lot of practice and then individuals increase their skill by coaching others within their job. Any training and practice should include the following topics or principles and more:

- There is a need for a model or a framework for coaching such as the GROW model – goal, reality, options and the way ahead
- An understanding of different behavioural styles
- Having a 'mind set' which wants people to develop, improve and progress
- Challenging without bullying
- Using the full spectrum of coaching from non-directive to directive
- Trust and holding confidential information

- Formulating good questions that can be delivered clearly avoiding multiple questions
- Using silence effectively allowing the other person to think
- Actively listening and good use of eye contact
- Identifying specific situations when coaching would be appropriate such as when delegating or reviewing an activity and giving feedback
- Making sure that the manager coach is clear about what they are trying to achieve themselves
- Recognise that all coaching doesn't need to take place in a private room with comfortable seats and subtle lighting, nor does it need to take hours

Finally a good way to introduce a coaching style into an organisation is via the review or appraisal system. If a coaching style is used while conducting an appraisal both parties would get more from it and so would the company. People ask how to keep the momentum going in a coaching relationship; if the coaching is good people will want to come back for more.

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