

YOUR CAREER

Distance Coaching

Out of sight,
but not out of mind.

By Daniel A. Feldman

The International Telework Association and Council estimates that more than 28 million workers in the United States—that's more than 20 percent of all workers—work remotely from client sites, in satellite offices, or at home. By 2006, more than 16 percent of employees in the European Union will be teleworkers, another source estimates. With greater frequency, supervisors are being asked to manage people over long distances using electronic media. When an employee is

working from a remote location, clear, regular, and defined coaching can be imperative to support the employee's professional effectiveness and growth.

Whether you are a teleworker or supervise a teleworker, understanding effective distance coaching can mean the difference between success and failure on the job.

The approach of a coach

It can be easy to forget about the devel-

opment needs of an employee working away from the main office, and teleworkers can end up feeling isolated and ignored. Therefore, the manager of a teleworker needs to make an even greater effort to practice effective coaching. A good coach

- is deliberate and prepared, has clear goals, and takes the time to plan
- makes the coaching process mutual by allowing for a balanced give and take and by being available and accessible
- strives to be an effective communicator, trying to understand the worker and communicate with flexibility
- is always looking for opportunities to coach, which works best when done frequently, informally and formally
- builds a coaching environment, using positive reinforcement and encouraging growth over the long haul.

Guidelines for distance coaching
Here are several guidelines for managers and workers for effective long-distance coaching.

Make the most of different modes of communication. The options for electronic communication include one-on-one telephone calls, telephone conferencing and videoconferencing, groupware (computer technology for group communication), email, and fax.

Use them all. Don't avoid phone calls because they seem to take more effort than email. At the same time, managers and employees shouldn't fall into the rut of communicating just via the phone or voicemail. A coaching call can be more effective when supported by other means of communication. For example, follow up an email containing detailed information with a clarifying phone call.

However you communicate, think through what you'll say ahead of time so your message will be clear, effective, and succinct. If you give overly long voice-mails or emails, you risk that the receiver will delete them before done.

Reiterate important points in writing via a fax or email. The agenda for a coaching call can be faxed or emailed prior to the call and modified by both parties. After a phone call, email or fax a summary of the discussion to encourage follow-through.

Stay involved. Plan how you're going to stay connected. For example, schedule regular telephone calls. At the end of each call, set up the next one. That helps create a sense of continuity and affiliation. Also schedule occasional face-to-face meetings. Even when you're using all of the available electronic means of communication, occasionally meeting

email alerts. If you're a teleworker and don't feel in the loop, make a point to ask what's going on. Another way for a distance worker to stay in touch with the organization is to maintain regular contact with other team members. Teleworkers should be included in staff meetings via telephone conference calls or videoconferencing and should check in with colleagues informally.

Clarify the structure for working long distance. Managers should help teleworkers establish an effective work routine. It can be difficult to remain focused and efficient without the struc-

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face-to-face reinforces your relationship and enhances communication.

It's important that you specify how each of you will be accessible. When employees work in the field or at home, they can feel isolated and disconnected. So, make sure you're clear about how to contact each other, and respond promptly.

Keep teleworkers connected to the organization. A good coach keeps remote workers aligned with the values and goals of the organization. The coach becomes a significant liaison, sharing information about the organization and the team.

If you're a manager, make sure distance workers receive up-to-date information about changes in organizational policy and structure. Register your people on appropriate listservs or

ture of the main office. Whether employees are working from a hotel room, home, client site, or satellite office, a coach can help them organize their surroundings to support the work process. That includes making and sticking to a daily schedule and keeping clear boundaries between work and personal life.

Another important aspect of clarifying a teleworker's work structure is for the manager and worker to agree on communication strategies. The manager should ask, "Do you prefer phone contact at the beginning or end of the week? Would you rather communicate via email and save phone calls for significant issues, or do you prefer more frequent phone calls?"

Using communication media

The most common long-distance coaching media include telephone calls, emails, and conference calls.

Coaching telephone calls. It's easy to be too casual on the phone. Prepare for a call the same way you would a face-to-face coaching session, and be clear about the purpose. For example, a manager might say, "I wanted to hear about what you've been doing and how I can help. Give me a summary of your day, and then tell me specifics of what's giving you a tough time." Both parties should pay attention to each other's tone, volume, and inflection. Touch base regularly, asking about the other person's reactions to what is being discussed. Do everything you can to avoid miscommunication. For example, you can regularly ask, "Does this make sense?" or "What do you think about that?"

Coaching emails. Emails are convenient. But unless used with care and sensitivity, they can become a fertile ground for misperceptions. It's easy to respond prematurely or inappropriately. Consequently, when coaching via email, take care to communicate clearly. If tension develops around what has been written in an email, call or meet in person to clarify the intended message.

When writing a coaching email, remember to

- take your time and give thought to what you're writing
- state clearly the purpose of the email
- try to include positive feedback
- review for errors and tone
- check that your email was received, either with a return receipt or by asking the recipient.

Coaching conference calls. Another form of long-distance coaching is the coaching conference call, which takes place over the phone or via videoconferencing. Well before the start of the meeting, have the agenda sent to every-

one. If computer groupware is available, use it to keep track of agenda items and action planning during the meeting. Follow up by sending important decisions and action points via email or fax.

To facilitate a coaching conference call effectively, make sure to

- pause routinely for comments
- ask for feedback on the topic or inquire whether the meeting's on track
- include go-rounds, in which every person comments about the topic and the facilitator sums up
- request input from quiet participants
- keep notes on important comments, decisions, and action points.

Teleworking offers many rewards to organizations and employees, including enhanced overall productivity and job satisfaction. Practicing distance coaching ensures that performance improvement and ongoing development are also part of the telework equation.

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