# Coaching: A Commitment to Leadership

By Steven J. Stowell

Today, technology, competition, and the desire of employees to be involved and to have their work be an outlet for self-expression are powerful forces shaping the leader's role. The need for quality, service, and innovation in organizations is creating a demand for employees who think, feel, and act like responsible partners in the enterprise. Employees are steadily becoming more experienced and educated; their aspirations to contribute and grow represent strong resources for leaders. To create employee allegiance and invigorate an organization's working spirit, there seems little doubt that the traditional notions of leader supremacy over employees will be replaced by notions of partnerships with them.

Vital to the idea of partnership is the leader's ability to stimulate employees through coaching. Leaders no longer can control the productivity of an employee as closely and directly as in the past, when productivity depended on sheer muscle and sweat. In today's workplace, an error isn't as easy to define as it was in a simpler era. The complexity and ambiguity of many jobs means a coaching approach is necessary—a one-on-one discussion of problems and challenges. Simply ignoring problems or reprimanding or disciplining employees are inappropriate responses for most situations

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today. A little finesse is necessary with the people in the organization who have good intentions and want to do the right thing.

Leaders will need to learn how to be

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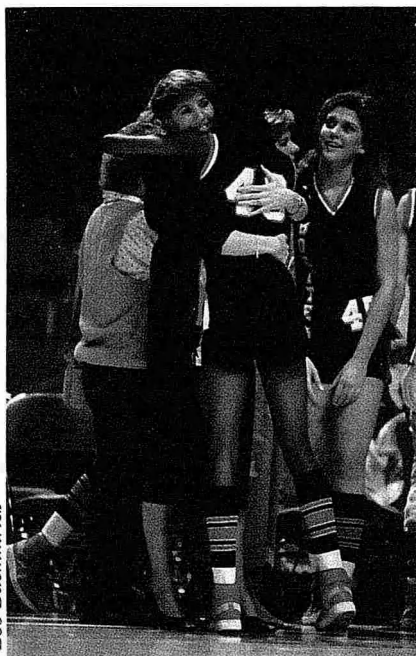
more like coaches in the partnership and less like bosses if they are to restore the entrepreneurial zeal, deep dedication, and team atmosphere missing in many organizations.

Leadership is the key

Many organizations are striving to respond to competitive pressures and the call for greater effectiveness by instituting corporate programs and poli-

cies that emphasize pride, excellence, and a positive culture. We can see this in the emergence of quality circles, guaranteed fair treatment plans, gain-sharing, team building, participative management, employee involvement, and the like. Many organizations have gained a reputation for excellence, and yet at the individual employee level we hear perpetual grumbling about the quality of leadership. It seems that when you are stuck with a lousy leader for a partner, life can be miserable in spite of all of the great programs and cultural changes. You can't legislate the quality of leadership in an organization by simply installing a new program or policy. Great leadership requires a deep personal commitment.

Leaders need to develop inspired employees with contagious enthusiasm who will challenge conventional wisdom in order to deliver quality services and products. But if employees have ineffective or oppressive leaders they can easily hide in the organizational bureaucracy and ignore their responsibility to contribute fully, to achieve their potential, and to take on the challenge of being more effective at work. Hence leaders will need to acquire a mindset, skills, and values that will help build employee commitment to the organization.

From my observations, leadership is being driven and shaped by deep values about managers' relationships with employees. Leadership is not a purely scientific process designed for bureaucratic or administrative efficiency. At its basic level leadership is designed to

serve employees and bring out the best in their performance. In order to do this, leaders must support employees' needs, create choices, seek commitment, and provide avenues of self-expression. Leaders must motivate people to combine their efforts with management's to achieve the common purpose of the organization.

This suggests that coaching—and modern leadership in general—is a delicate balancing act. On the one hand, leaders have to insure quality, productivity, and customer satisfaction. On the other hand, they have to pay attention to the needs of employees, to support them, and to create a positive work environment. As the study in this article suggests, leaders need to develop particular skills for face-to-face coaching sessions to help create good partnerships and meet the organization's fundamental objectives. In order to be a partner, leaders will have to apply skills they already have and perhaps learn some new ones.

The study results that underlie this article provide a deeper understanding of the skills, values, and courage demonstrated by highly effective coaches in difficult situations. The study was based on the assumption that the true test of leadership ability is when things are not going well and the leader is under pressure. The focus was on the problem-solving and performance dialogue between leaders and employees—face-to-face communications. While the number of participants was small, the study itself was intense and identified both positive and negative leader behaviors. My position and beliefs concerning leadership and the coaching process come from my observations during the study.

Management needs versus employee needs

The first principle I learned from the study is that highly effective coaches view their employees as partners in the unit or operation. They include them, trust them to help solve organizational and individual problems facing the team, and communicate fully with them.

The challenge for most of us is that we are not used to a lot of open dialogue and collaboration; it feels risky at first. We think that partnerships are reserved for special occasions such as the president and CEO, law firms, or bridge parties. The truth is, we need to create partnerships throughout the organization, from the boardroom to the boilerroom. We've all participated in partnerships before, some good and some not so good. But the benefits of a successful partnership are obvious: teamwork, diversification of skills and abilities, creativity, and emotional support during difficult times. Most leaders are capable of contributing to a partnership in a positive way, but many do not think in real partnership terms in the workplace.

A partnership with employees makes sense because leaders and employees share commonalities that are more important than their differences. Leader-employee commonalities tend to be major:
■ both parties gain if both succeed in the job;
■ both have their livelihoods on the line if they fail;
■ both have to be concerned about the efficient use of resources;
■ both have to take risks in order to

Life can be miserable in spite of all the great programs

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survive and prosper in challenging environments.

Leader-employee differences tend to be minor:
■ the job titles are a little different;
■ the leader has a bigger paycheck;
■ in the event of a mishap, the leader probably will be reprimanded before the employee is.

So what's the big deal? What, if anything, stands in the way of the natural evolution of strong partnerships between leaders and employees? Actually, the forces are quite pronounced.

Leading others involves a lot of pressure and responsibility. Employees depend on leaders and bet their futures that they can guide them through rough waters and help them grow and develop. Yet management wants fewer errors, increased quality, and a competitive product or service for the customers and clients. Organizations are requiring and demanding great managers or administrators. In order to be

a great leader you have to make a personal choice and commit to this role.

Leaders are caught in the middle of a traditional tug-of-war between management and employee interests that affects their ability to build partnerships. On the one hand, management wants the most for its money. On the other, employees want the leader to be on their side. Getting caught in the middle doesn't feel good; it is frustrating and creates ambivalence. In the classic boss-worker dilemma, the conventional bureaucracy wants leaders to:
■ extract obedience and responsiveness from employees;
■ maximize output;
■ maintain conformity;
■ protect management's trade secrets from all unordained personnel;
■ insure compliance and reprimand failure.

The employee wants leaders to:
■ provide autonomy and allow some risk;
■ be fair and compassionate;
■ allow participation and involvement in decisions;
■ share information and be trusting;
■ provide interesting and challenging work.

So the need to control as well as to care for employees creates a predicament. Some special skills and finesse are required to handle the pressures, ambiguity, and contradictory forces. The leader needs a parallel style of thinking and acting—the ability to balance and attend to both human and business needs. If the leader is perceived as simply carrying out the wishes of management, then employees feel abandoned and wonder what kind of a partner the leader really is. If the leader is perceived as too soft or people oriented, management gets worried that the leader will give away the store and the shipments won't go out. With some attention to the coaching role, though, leaders can learn to manage the bottom line through the commitment of their employee partners. After all, leaders don't want their employees to think and act like second-class citizens.

The challenge

Leaders can achieve success in their unit if they are lucky to have compatible high achievers working for them. In fact, leading employees would be easy if people were flawless. Their

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needs and the imperfections in their performance, however, are what give leadership its meaning and challenge; you really earn your pay when you have to coach, confront, and solve problems with employees.

Information from my research and observations indicates that most leaders aren't talking to the members of their team about organizational challenges and individual performance issues. Talking with employees face to face about performance problems isn't the most pleasant task. Actually, it can be so disagreeable that it is never acknowledged or put on a daily activity list.

Leaders can take advantage of the common interests they have with employees. Both want to survive in an increasingly competitive world. Both want to insure their prosperity, aspirations, and lifestyle. Both want some control of their destiny, to have their rights respected, and to receive support. These common interests are the basic ingredients of a partnership and positive exchange.

Under normal conditions, good coaching and good partnerships are initiated by and flow from the leader. The leader's responsibility for heading in the direction of a partnership results from his or her formal authority. Due to the nature of his or her position,

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employees look to the leader to set the tone of the relationship.

The study

The purpose of the study was to produce a model of important coaching behaviors. The organization that is the basis for the study is a major national service organization with units in nearly every state. The 26 participants were a combination of lower-, middle-, and executive-level leaders; there were 16 women and 11 men. They supervised information processing, accounting, computing, and operating functions. Information was also gathered from employees of these leaders.

For the purpose of comparison, two distinct groups were selected for participation in the study: the most effective coaches and the least effective coaches. The selection procedure required the use of surveys and questionnaires as well as a peer nomination procedure. Participants responded to

semistructured interview questions, recounted previous successful and unsuccessful coaching episodes, and engaged in actual coaching discussions concerning real problems.
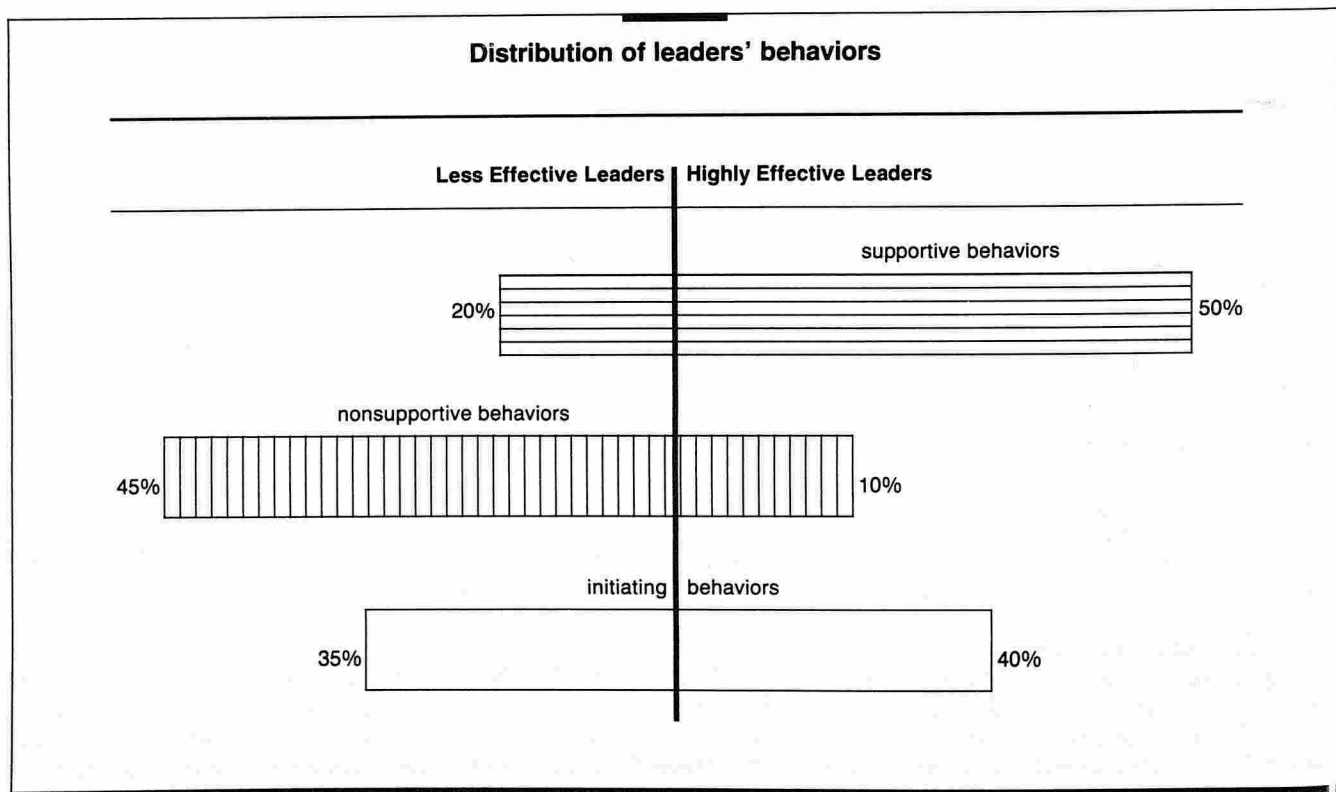
The behaviors and skills

Forty-seven specific coaching actions and behaviors emerged from this study, each falling into one of the following three categories:

■ *Supportive behaviors.* The leaders' words and actions showed consideration, concern, and acceptance of the employees. These behaviors reduced tension and facilitated open communication.

■ *Nonsupportive behaviors.* The leaders expressed aggression and power. The messages were adversarial and hostile.

■ *Initiating behaviors.* The leaders attempted to initiate and structure an action-oriented, problem-analysis discussion. These actions tended to challenge the employee and stimulate a resolution.

The results were crystal clear. The highly effective leaders and successful coaching episodes were characterized by high levels of supportive behaviors, low levels of nonsupportive behaviors, and moderate amounts of initiating behaviors. The leader builds a framework for the coaching discussion with

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Distribution of leaders' behaviors

	Less Effective Leaders	Highly Effective Leaders
supportive behaviors	20%	50%
nonsupportive behaviors	45%	10%
initiating behaviors	35%	40%

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this kind of tone:

■ "We clearly have a situation that deserves some attention. Let's see if we can solve it."

■ "I'm confident in your ability. I'll back you up."

■ "I'd like to hear your ideas on how to get started."

The information from this study suggests that support is the centerpiece of coaching. For the sake of clarity, I don't think the support-initiate process is a manipulative "sandwich" technique, nor is it a candy-coated approach. Rather, this approach combines clear and firm communication with understanding while providing some compassion, freedom, and integrity for the employee. Effective coaching requires a balanced discussion in which the leader first tries to understand before he or she tries to be understood.

I can't emphasize that point strongly enough. The most significant difference between effective leaders in successful encounters and less effective leaders in unsuccessful encounters is the frequency of supportive behaviors used in the coaching session. The support we observed came in three essential forms:

■ verbal (supportive statements);

■ tangible (help, resources, and so on);

■ active (listening, asking, body language, physical arrangements for the discussion, and showing genuine interest).

The figure depicts the pattern found in the data.

Definition of key leader behaviors

The following were found to be the most significant supportive behaviors:

■ collaboration regarding solutions to the problem;

■ provision of help and assistance (training, resources, and so on);

■ concern over the employee's needs and objectives;

■ empathy for the employee and attention to obstacles and problems;

■ expression about the value of the employee and his or her contribution to the work;

■ acceptance of some responsibility for the situation;

■ interaction that provides time for the employee to air his or her feelings.

Other supportive actions from the leader that played a less dominant role were encouragement and recognition

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for specific achievements.

The following nonsupportive, aggressive behaviors were closely examined and defined:

■ negativity (doubt, anger, accusations);
■ expression of power, supremacy (threats, discipline, referral to higher levels of management);
■ demonstration of frustration (resulting from pressure from higher management, customers, and the like);
■ noninteraction (a one-way communication style);
■ nonhelpful approach (unwillingness to assist);
■ a nonempathetic position (no concern for employee's problems and obstacles);
■ disregard and indifference (employee's needs and objectives received little leader attention);
■ creation of adverse circumstances (employee felt surprised, exposed, or frustrated with the circumstances and timing of the discussions).

Another outcome of this study was the definition of the problem-solving, or initiating, behaviors that facilitated change once the support had been established. I found that the types of initiating behaviors that are strongly emphasized in many coaching models and programs were evenly distributed between the two study groups. It seems that initiating behaviors, such as problem solving, feedback, planning, and follow-up, are important, but they are not the driving force in successful coaching. The most significant initiating behaviors include the following:

■ feedback and analysis of issues and concerns;
■ clarification of leader expectations and requirements;
■ exploration of impact and effects of employee's actions;
■ action planning around solutions and desired changes (initiated by the leader);
■ seeking commitment to the action plan;
■ clarification of positive and negative consequences connected to future action and plans.

Other discoveries

The intensity of this study allowed other important aspects of the coaching process to surface.

■ A coaching session requires 35 to 45 minutes and should focus on a maximum of one or two issues.
■ Leaders can use as much as 60 per-

cent of the conversation time and not be overcontrolling or dominating.
■ Planning, preparation, and rehearsal prior to the coaching session are clearly beneficial to the leader.
■ Employees the leader hires are more likely to have productive coaching experiences than employees who were in place when the leader assumed his or her position.
■ Coaching takes a lot of leader courage. Employees were more than twice as willing to engage in a real coaching session than leaders.
■ Leaders prefer to talk about the employee's personal style, skills, and communication, while employees would rather stick to task- or job-related issues.
■ Employees who the leader believes need coaching the most are less interested in being coached.

The bottom line

Coaching and influencing employees effectively is not as simple as some models and writers would lead us to

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Confronting performance concerns is never put on the daily activity list

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believe. Leaders must achieve a critical balance between being supportive and caring and being clear and direct. Employees seem to want coaching from leaders as long as leaders are not overcontrolling and authoritarian. Employees don't want to be attacked, hurt, devalued, or to lose self-esteem in the coaching process. They want to come out of a constructive confrontation or a positive developmental discussion feeling optimistic that they can be successful in making changes.

Coaching situations represent an important opportunity for the leader to be supportive when things are difficult for the employee. Leaders must demonstrate their commitment to a strong, positive relationship with the employee. This confidence in the employee becomes the basis for successfully confronting the challenges, concerns, and opportunities that inevitably come up at work.

The coaching interaction is also an opportunity for a leader to build a real

partnership based on trust. In my opinion, unless a leader demonstrates supportiveness, that leader hasn't earned the right to be firm, direct, and confrontational, and will have difficulty achieving a meaningful partnership with employees. This holds true in very difficult and tense situations, as well as routine and developmental coaching situations. The required supportiveness is not borne out of the need to be friendly or popular but, rather, out of the need to be responsive and to facilitate the employee's best performance and effort.

For the leader, confrontations, even constructive ones, frequently produce considerable anxiety and tension. Reluctance to coach is natural. Even after a successful coaching session, the leaders in the study felt that it was tough, said it wasn't fun, and were relieved that it was over. Nevertheless, great leaders are great partners first because they have learned to manage both human and business needs.

The challenge ahead is to help leaders apply and implement sound coaching techniques so that they can help develop a team of dedicated, competent, and motivated employees. It is really up to the individual leader to create a productive and humane workplace. Once leaders have decided on the kind of organization and relationship they want to create, they need to share this vision with their employees and ask for their support, because a leader can only achieve excellence through relationships with others. From the organization, leaders deserve quality instruction, encouragement, and guidance in exchange for their efforts to face employees one on one in a coaching session. Through honest face-to-face coaching, leaders will help to restore the entrepreneurial zeal to their organizations and, by doing so, will become truly great leaders. []