Invention: A Key to Effective Coaching

A Program at Tektronix to make Coaching Work

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The coaching process between manager and subordinate is a widely accepted application of management by objectives. Tektronix has used an adaptation of the Coaching course developed by Walter Mahler and Guyot Frazier.[1] At Tektronix, Inc., after three years of emphasizing (and training in) the coaching process, we found little written evidence of well-defined objectives—called performance indicators by Mahler—being used. Assuming management by objectives and coaching to be sound approaches, we had to find out why performance indicators were not a vital part of managing.

Typical position guides were no different than the brief job descriptions used for salary administration. Why did not the position guides contain performance indicators? Why did they only have statements of responsibilities and procedures? It seemed the only momentum for managers to have any such documents was for salary administration purposes. Our conclusion: managers did not find performance indicators useful enough to bother to develop them. After all, their work was getting done, people knew where they stood.

Something was missing in the course. Managers should see *proof* of the importance of performance indicators, and be fully skilled in writing them. The task of writing indicators is difficult—and risky—because indicators are guesses about conditions that ought to exist if a responsibility is well

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or poorly performed.

We changed the course to help managers learn to *invent* performance indicators, then test out their value by the way the course proceeded.

When invent? Picture what happens in the process of invention. The inventor knows a lot about the problem he is working on. He has explored many possible ways to solve the problem. He progresses in bits and starts. At some moment, an idea or a gadget exists which can do something not done before. The invention puts old elements of the problem together in a new way.

In coaching, the known elements are the responsibilities, procedures, the how-to. The file clerk knows she must file, and gets training in the systems for which she is responsible. Lacking any performance indicators, she may consider her work well done if she understands the system, does not make mistakes, and keeps material to be filed at a minimum. But the typical user merely asks her, "Mary, will you put this away?" By herself, she cannot guess what may be the goals of the users of the filing system. Do they want fast retrieval? Do they want to be able to find stored information themselves? Performance indicators need to be invented to show the file clerk the results *users* need. A new dimension is added to her understanding of her responsibility—and she and her manager will find performance appraisal much easier.

What we needed in the course, then, was a method for training managers how to invent performance indicators. The next section describes the three steps for inventing performance indicators used in the coaching course.

Recognition of Behavioral Objectives

The first step is to get recognition of the behavioral objective. Students learn to distinguish a well-stated performance indicator from statements of responsibilities or procedures. Here is an excerpt from the Tektronix Coaching Manual:

> Which of the items below are statements of performance indicators? (Check each item you think is a performance indicator.)
>
> ....a. Material costs do not exceed 5% of budgeted amounts.
> ....b. Prepare monthly inventory reports.
> ....c. Files and retrieves department correspondence.
> ....d. No complaints from groups using output from the position.
> ....e. Coordinates work with others in the group.
>
> You should have checked *a* and *d;* as indicators they define how the output of performance will be measured. The other items describe activities but do not specify how the impact of the activity will be judged.

Four Criteria of Effective Indicators

The second step is learning the four criteria of effectively stated indicators, and how quickly to critique the quality of a specific set of indicators by applying the criteria. The definitions of the criteria in the Manual are:

1. Are they *clear?* Are they in writing? Do any of the words confuse you?
2. Are they *realistic?* Given the work conditions and the apparent abilities of the incumbent, can the goal be met? (Expecting a trainee technician to assure existence of specific product planning goals for engineering, for example, would be unrealistic.)
3. Are they *relevant?* Are the end results implied reasonably within the control of this one position? Are responsibilities shared with other positions so speciifed? Does

the end result connect with the responsibility under which it is listed? Does it fit better with other responsibilities?

4. Are they *measurable?* What information will be needed to judge the performance level? How will the information be obtained? By whom? When?

As the students participate in critiquing each others' documents, each finds he can quickly spot well-written and poorly-written indicators. As they discuss why a statement is unclear, for example, they find that any word not commonly understood in the context of the position being discussed is a potential source of confusion. In like manner, they become familiar with the characteristics and typical errors of the other three criteria.

The Invention Process

The third step is the invention process. It occurs in and out of class, but is initiated by the assignment that each student will bring in a document with indicators written in it. Here are the instructions given in the Manual:

How to Write Indicators
An indicator is a guess about what should happen at a predetermined future date, as a result of executing a responsibility. (1) If the responsibility is well performed by time t, what condition will exist? (2) If the responsibility is poorly performed, what difference in conditions will that make?

Some indicators imply a scale from poor to well performed; other indicators may be "go-no-go"; still others may be a minimal point; others may be a maximal point. Different types of work are best defined by different types of indicators.

The *second* step in developing indicators is to obtain a critique via the four criteria of clarity, realism, relevance and measurability. You might ask a colleague who knows how to apply the four criteria to give you his opinion. The important test of indicators is, of course, in the actual coaching experiences between subordinate and manager: Do each of them clearly enough understand what is expected and how output will be judged?

Here is a detailed example of indicators that could be developed for the responsibility: "Takes dictation and types letters," for a secretary.
Question 1:
What condition will exist if the responsibility is well performed?
Indicator: No misspelled words or typeovers.
Type of measure: go-no-go *standard.*
Indicator: Letters are mailed at times specified; delays are anticipated and not due to slow typing.
Type of measure: *Combination*—subjective and standard
Indicator: Sets example of speed and layout which others in office try to follow.
Type of measure: Scale — subjective
Indicator: Can accurately transcribe own shorthand taken more than one month earlier.
Type of measure: Maximum — *standard*
Question 2:
What difference will it make if the responsibility is poorly performed?
Indicator: Letters have to be redone because of error in transcription.
Indicator: Other responsibilities neglected because of excessive time spent transcribing/typing.
Indicator: No telephone calls or follow-up letters from people expecting letters.

In the sessions, students do critiques of each others' position guides in subgroups. The sub-groups appear more effective than a single, large group: it takes less time to cover critiques for all the students, and after the course they have a ready-made sub-group to serve as a sounding board when they

need a critique.

What is done in the rest of the course? Where does the inventing and critiquing fit in?

Other parts of the Coaching Course

Introduction. The first session reviews a glossary of terms, the place of Coaching in the process of managing, and an overview of two coaching principles and related tools. The glossary assures common points of reference for the students, and eliminates much potential confusion. As an example, the Manual distinguishes between job and job guide vs. position and position guide:

WORK—An act or task done for a purpose.

POSITION—The work (tasks, responsibilities) assigned to one person.

POSITION GUIDE—A detailed statement of responsibilities and performance standards in a position. Used in coaching.

JOB—A group of positions with similar work. Usually in one salary range.

JOB GUIDE—A brief statement of function (or purpose), major relationships, and responsibilities in a job. Used in job evaluation.

Figure 1

SECTION II. PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS

Responsibilities and
Performance Indicators   Performance Information   Rating*
                                                                              ‡ + ✓ - =

1. _____   _____   ☐☐☐☐☐

2. _____   _____   ☐☐☐☐☐

5. _____   _____   ☐☐☐☐☐

6. _____   _____   ☐☐☐☐☐

* ‡ Excellent   + Above Adequate   ✓ Adequate   - Below Adequate   = Must Improve Immediately

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Figure 1—Reverse side

P E R F O R M A N C E   R E V I E W

EMPLOYEE _____ POSITION _____

IMMEDIATE MANAGER _____ DEPT. _____

DATE STARTED TEKTRONIX _____

DATE STARTED PRESENT POSITION _____

DATE OF LAST PERFORMANCE REVIEW _____

DISCUSSED WITH EMPLOYEE BY _____ DATE _____

ROUTE TO _____

Rating*

+
+ + ✓ - =

SECTION I. SUMMARY OF OVER-ALL PERFORMANCE. [| | | |] _____

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

* ‡ Excellent   + Above Adequate   ✓ Adequate   – Below Adequate   = Must Improve Immediately

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Managing is depicted in four processes: planning, organizing, supervising and controlling. Supervising, in turn, is explained as staffing, coaching and pay administration. It is stressed that supervising, including coaching, cannot be accomplished without sound planning, organizing and controlling.

The two coaching principles and three related tools are:

Principles	*Tools*
1. SHARED WORK STRUCTURE	1. Position Guide
2. SHARED PEFORMANCE EVALUATION	Performance Review via 2. Performance Analysis 3. Performance Interview

Figure 2

SECTION III. PERFORMANCE INTERVIEW

Do Both Agree on Performance Analysis?	Possible causes	Possible action
1. _____		
2. _____		
6. _____		

Figure 2—Reverse side

SECTION IV. PLAN OF ACTION

State all actions agreed to: Changes in position guide, work methods, training and development activities, objectives for next review period, other decisions to be made.....

What will be done – – – – – – – – – – – – By Whom – – – – – – And When | Date

Coaching is defined as any process by which a manager and subordinate regularly attempt to improve performance results. The principles and related tools are aimed at yielding improved performance results. The second principle reads:

"If the manager and subordinate are to improve performance results, then they must develop a shared perform-
ance evaluation."

Backing up the second principle, the first principle states:

"If the manager and subordinate are to develop a shared performance evaluation, then they must develop a shared work structure.'

A description of the related tools follows. The position guide is defined above.

Performance Analysis (see Figure

1) consists of:

> Collecting, recording and analyzing performance information. Includes (a) collecting performance information, (b) comparing the information against the standards, and (c) rating the adequacy of the performance.

Performance Interview is:

> A two-way problem-solving discussion between manager and subordinate to review what has (or has not) been accomplished why, and what to do in the future. Includes (a) confirming each person's pool of performance information, (b) discussing the rating, (c) analyzing causes of high and low performances, (d) generating several possible actions, and (e) agreeing on a joint plan of action. A *summary* is usually written and agreed upon by the two people.

Session Two is the position guide development discussed in the first section of this article.

Third part of the course is a discussion of experiences with the second coaching tool, performance analysis. See Figure 1. Indicators from the position guide are keyed into the analysis form. Specific information about performance is entered in the column headed "Performance Information," followed by the rating.

Last part of the course is a description, demonstration and critique of a performance interview. See Figure 2. Based on the performance analysis, intense discussion of possible causes and possible actions is stressed. Skill development is not offered in this course; related company courses are offered on interviewing.

A final significant benefit of this approach to teaching the coaching process: Managers initially wonder how much more paperwork is being "thrust" on them, and which parts of the *"real"* work will suffer. After learning the approach via the specific tools and procedures, managers find they obtain far greater results in *less* total time spent on coaching. This is because the habit of thinking first picked up via the mechanics of the course becomes natural and customary for them in many of their supervisory actions. Thus, the daily informal coaching is improved as the primary outcome of the course.

Reference

1. For a description of Walter Mahler and Guyot Frazier's Coaching course, see their article, "Performance Appraisal: A Common-Sense Approach," pp. 199-230 in H. F. Merrill and E. Martin (eds) "Developing Executive Skills," John Wiley, 1958.