

Real-Time Coaching Boosts Performance

BY KAREN L. RANCOURT

YOU DON'T HAVE TO WALK MILES IN MANAGERS' SHOES TO HELP THEM IDENTIFY THEIR STRENGTHS AND SHORE UP THEIR WEAK SPOTS. JUST STAY HOT ON THEIR HEELS.

Real-time coaching offers a way to give immediate, practical feedback on a manager's performance. Here's how real-time coaching works: You "shadow" a manager on the job for a full day, breaking frequently to discuss the person's management style and suggest new strategies.

Real-time coaching can pinpoint and correct easily overlooked performance problems. Managers benefit from the close attention to detail and personal support that this strategy provides.

Consider the circumstances carefully before you suggest real-time coaching. To work well, this technique requires

- a willing manager
- a high level of trust between coach and learner
- a setting in which co-workers understand and support the process.

For example, real-time coaching

proved a boon to Nick, a relatively inexperienced manager who had risen quickly to general manager at a small manufacturing firm.

Nick volunteered for real-time coaching because he saw the activity as a short-cut to sharpening his basic management skills. He trusted the consultant tapped to serve as his coach because he had worked closely with her for more than a year on another project. The consultant, Lea, also was well-known and accepted by the firm's employees.

Getting started

Participants will reap the most benefits from real-time coaching if you take the following steps.

First, ask the manager to submit a short list of goals for the session. Nick, for example, wanted help in three areas: managing interruptions, acting on his priorities rather than reacting to others' concerns,

and delegating more responsibility to his employees.

Set the stage by briefing all employees about how the process will work. Nick's coach circulated a memo to all staff members several days in advance explaining real-time coaching and what they could expect. Just before the coaching session started, Lea greeted all the employees in the firm and encouraged them to relax and be themselves.

Meet briefly with the manager before the start of the work day. Review his or her reasons for participating and discuss any apprehensions he or she might have.

Once the shadowing starts, try to keep the act of observing invisible. Never make eye contact with the manager or with anyone the manager talks to.

Tape the feedback sessions so that the manager later can review and reinforce what he or she has learned.

If the manager is willing, schedule a session at which the manager can share with others the insights that he or she gained from real-time coaching. Depending on the lessons learned and the manager's preference, the group could include only other managers or both managers and staff.

A day unfolds

Here is how Nick's experience with real-time coaching unfolded. First, while Lea observed, he met briefly in his office with one of his supervisors. During this meeting, two other people popped in with questions, he took two phone calls from customers, and he did some paperwork, such as completing quotes on jobs and approving purchase orders for supplies.

Next, Nick visited the shop floor to monitor production. He talked one-on-one with three people, and then conversed with two small groups of employees.

During the hour he spent on the shop floor, Nick answered several pages alerting him to calls from customers. Each time, he returned to his office to take the customer's call. Then, he headed back to the shop floor and tried to pick up where he had left off.

After about an hour, Nick and his coach took a break for a feedback session. First, Nick described his feelings about having the coach

NICK OFTEN FELT OVERWHELMED WHEN HE LEFT THE SHOP FLOOR

follow him around the plant.

"At first I thought I would be nervous having you observe me, but once we got going, your being there didn't bother me at all," he said. Nick also said that his co-workers did not seem fazed by the consultant's presence. "Everything seems pretty normal. They're used to having you around."

Lea focused her feedback on the phone calls that Nick accepted from customers. Customer calls frequently interrupted Nick's work, distracted him, and sometimes caused him to feel resentful. But, Nick felt compelled to respond quickly to customers' concerns.

Nick and his coach decided that Nick would designate one hour a day when he would take and return customer calls. This strategy shifted Nick's focus from quick service to high-quality service: By designating a time for customer calls, Nick could focus his attention completely on his customers. He could prepare for calls by reviewing customer files. Also, he could direct one of his supervisors to respond to a call if appropriate. Meanwhile, Nick's daily time with his staff would not be marred by interruptions.

After the feedback session concluded, Nick returned to the shop floor for an hour and a half. He talked to people, solved problems, made suggestions, and asked questions.

When Nick and Lea debriefed again, Nick said that he enjoyed talking with people on the shop floor about both work and their personal lives, but that he often left the floor feeling overwhelmed and confused by all the tasks he had to do.

The coach observed that Nick did not carry a notebook. Nick said he had tried using small adhesive notes, but that he wound up with a pile of useless scraps. He also thought that he appeared more organized and at-

tentive if he focused on people rather than on writing things down.

Lea suggested that he carry a notebook and pen. As he made his rounds and greeted everyone on the floor, he would keep the notebook under his arm. When he was ready to work, he would shift the pad to a writing position and poise his pen. The coach advised Nick that his employees would soon associate his writing stance with business. When Nick held his notebook under his arm, workers would feel free to initiate informal conversations.

Spotlighting strengths

Nick's coach also spent time analyzing several telephone conversations Nick had with unhappy customers and staff.

One call was from Mark, the firm's sales manager. Mark told Nick that Don, a disgruntled customer, wanted to deal only with Mark or Nick; he did not want to discuss his orders with any of the supervisors. Mark was annoyed by Don's demand for special treatment.

Nick empathized with Mark. "Yes, I can see that having to deal with Don must be trying for you. His demands must seem petty and tiresome, especially when you've tried so hard to give him good service," he said.

"Let me make a suggestion," Nick continued, "one that might be asking a lot of you, Mark. There is some reason Don feels he has to have direct contact with you or me. I don't think we know what that reason is. If you're agreeable, call Don and assure him that, of course, he can contact us if he wants. Then make an appointment to meet with him in person, and see if you can find out what's really bothering him. What do you think? Great! Thanks, Mark. Let me know if you need any help from me."

Lea pointed out that Nick had used a variety of listening, negotiation, and management skills during this short conversation with Mark. Nick listened calmly and did not interrupt; he empathized with Mark, but kept the focus of the conversation on the customer's needs; he gave suggestions for handling the situation gracefully, but he kept the responsibility for resolving the issue vested with Mark; and he per-

sualed Mark to follow through.

In another conversation, Nick had to tell a customer, Nadine, that workers had discovered a scratch on an expensive mold that the customer had sent in for some work. Nick was not relishing the conversation, but he remained calm and reassuring.

"Nadine, I've just been informed that there's a deep scratch on the mold you sent us. We're not sure how it happened—it could have happened when it was being packed, during shipping, or after it arrived here. There's no way of knowing for sure. I propose that we complete your job and send the mold back to you. You decide if you can use it with the scratch. If not, we'll talk again and see what the options are. Thanks, Nadine, we appreciate your working with us on this."

The coach helped Nick articulate his guidelines for dealing with difficult interpersonal relations. According to Nick, "I always try to flip things around. I say to myself, 'If I were Don or Nadine talking to me, Nick, what would I want to hear that would keep me wanting to do business with this company?'"

Nick's coach assured him that, rather than highlighting his naivete, he was using sound management strategies. His natural empathy served as the cornerstone of his management style.

Resolving conflicts

Nick was less successful when he was called on to resolve others' conflicts. For example, his coach observed that when someone approached Nick to complain about someone else's behavior, Nick immediately talked to all the parties involved and tried to mediate a solution.

The coach suggested that Nick work on his conflict-management techniques. For instance, whenever someone complained to Nick, he could respond with a question: "What are you hoping I will do about your problem?"

Nick had a chance to try out the technique the same day. While on the shop floor, Hank, one of the supervisors, took Nick aside to describe an unpleasant exchange Hank had had with a new employee.

When Hank finished, Nick asked

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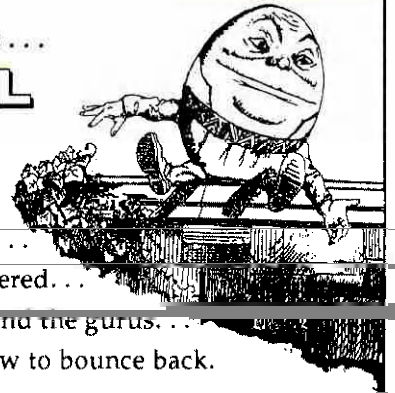
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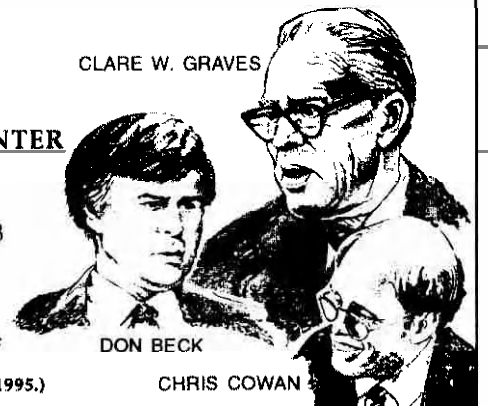
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him, "What are you hoping I will do about this situation?"

Hank said, "Well, actually, I don't want you to do anything about it. At this point I just want you to know about it."

Hank's response caused Nick to wonder how many times he had involved himself in others' conflicts when he was neither wanted or needed.

In the final feedback session of the day, Lea pointed out that Stanley, who maintained the plant's equipment, had brought Nick a written and numbered list of items he wanted to discuss. But, no other employees used a similar list. Why?

Nick said that he had asked Stanley to write down his concerns because Stanley loved to talk and had trouble staying focused during a conversation. Stanley opted to set priorities by numbering items. Nick said that since he had suggested the list, he and Stanley resolved issues quickly and that Stanley was much more productive.

Nick's coach suggested that he ask his other employees to use the same technique. Nick had focused on the list as a way of resolving a specific problem with a specific employee, but when his coach pointed it out, he recognized that asking his employees to make lists and set priorities was a sensible management practice with widespread applications.

Building competence, fostering confidence

When Nick and his coach wrapped up, Nick described the experience as time well-spent.

"I learned how to organize myself and set priorities. I realized that the effort I put into building interpersonal relationships is not misplaced," he said. On the other hand, "I'm less likely to jump into the middle of other people's conflicts. I feel less reactive and resentful and more willing to delegate."

Overall, Nick concluded, "I better understand my strengths and how to use them. I'm more focused in

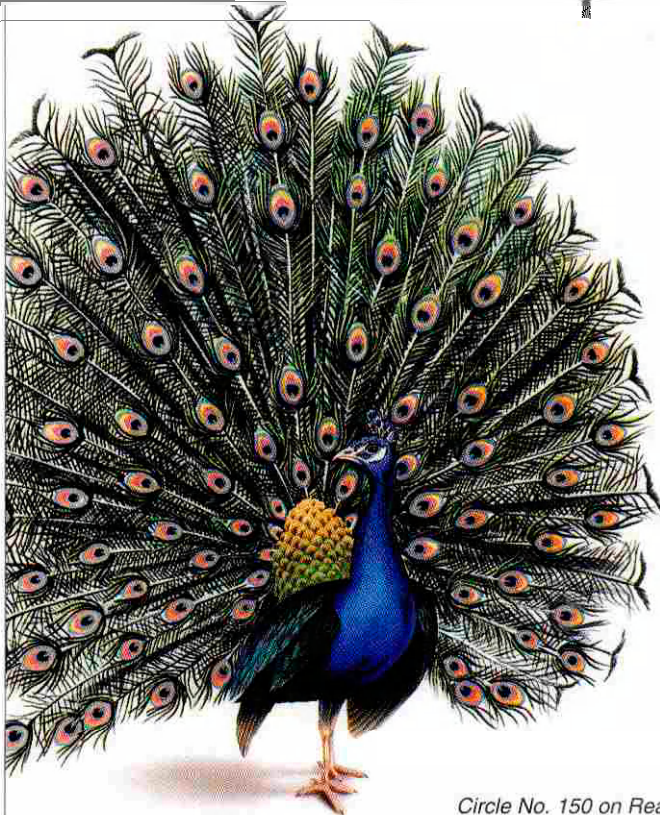
my daily work, and I feel more competent about how to accomplish my goals."

As Nick discovered, real-time coaching can boost a manager's confidence by spotlighting highly effective skills that he or she takes for granted. Real-time coaches can open managers' eyes to simple changes that make their personal interactions more satisfying and their days more productive. One-on-one analysis also can pinpoint the areas and skills that managers need to work on over the long haul. ■

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