

Coaching: A Tool for Success

By LYNNE TYSON and HERMAN BIRNBRAUER

I magine the following. You and your crew have just been notified to report to the training department. Your work area will be changed substantially. The work you've been doing is manual, and you are classified as unskilled laborers. Some cannot read or write and will have to operate computerized work stations...

OR

You were just promoted and told to report to the training department for the new supervisor course...

OR

You are being transferred to a new department in the home office. You will be the department manager and initially will know only a few people.

Will you be anxious, apprehensive, nervous or frightened? Would it help you to know that a coach will be assigned to aid you? Will it help you to know that this coach is a highly respected member of the organization and committed to your becoming successful?

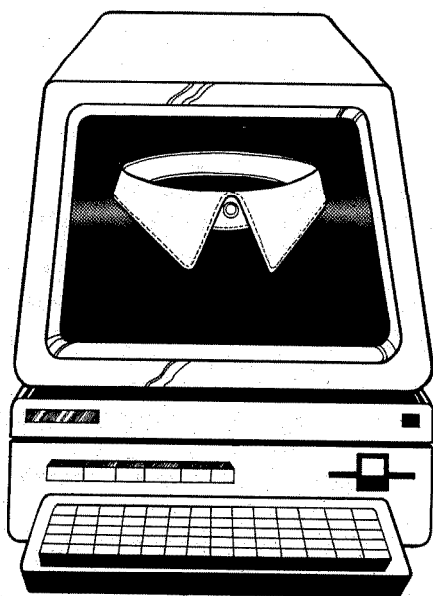
Coaching has been defined as individually helping a subordinate to improve job performance. Coaching is always directed toward helping individuals develop in a particular environment and, as result of that personal development, improve performance.

The role of the coach requires a personal one-on-one relationship and a concern with the whole person. To get best results, there must be a sincere

and unselfish interest in seeing the employee improve in these areas: job performance; responsibility and independence; coping with change in a mature fashion; and possibilities for future advancement. Coaching fills a gap that frequently exists in employee development programs—the need for personal attention to an employee's questions, job-related problems and career plans.

A coaching system provides exceptional opportunities for the supervisor or manager to get to know subordinates—their capabilities, values, ambitions, past experiences, potentials, ideas and future goals. The chance to listen to them, explore their point of view on various, job-related matters and to aid in removing barriers, discovering new alternatives and reaching decisions for further improvement provides an opportunity to develop team workers and possible future leaders. Faith in people, and a belief that most can improve and grow in a suitable climate, with guidance, understanding and help is essential for success in coaching. We must like people and believe in them before we can help them.

The nature of the person being coached is also important. Some people have a high level of motivation. They are achievers who eagerly make commitments and who scarcely seem to need coaching. Their commitment, however, may not be total, or they may become bored or unchallenged. The coach must help



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these employees decide which objective they wish to pursue—which would provide a significant challenge—before getting into the details of development in that direction. In other cases, it may be important to aid an achiever in viewing objectives realistically with respect to the end and the means to realize it. Achievers usually need coaching during job enlargement or enrichment.

The more significant task will involve the employee you consider capable, but who lacks self-motivation toward further development. He or she may be interested only in the paycheck or time away from the job. When such people appear to have potential, the coach's first job is to try to help them become motivated. We, as coaches, cannot motivate other people, but we can assist them in discovering and developing their own motivation. In the coaching role, we are

able to create an atmosphere wherein motivation can take place. A work climate conducive to the development of individual employees and to real consideration of needs, feelings, ideas and suggestions is essential to building an environment for self-motivation.

At times, a coach can recognize something in an employee's past history or experience that has prevented growth or motivation. Assisting the employee in discovering why he or she is not interested in self-development or improvement may allow a coach to work with the employee toward eliminating the barriers to motivation.

Self-image with respect to the job is important and directly relates to a person's comparison of the job to outside activities. Is the job important? Is it worth learning to do well? Does the employee know why it must be

done? Is the employee proud of his or her skills? Does he or she want to do all things well? Some people believe they are unable to achieve higher skill levels. They need to discover that they can.

If coaching is to be effective, the work environment must be conducive to effective performance. This involves five major ingredients: a complete understanding of what is expected; an opportunity to perform; an opportunity to progress; help and assistance when needed; and reward or recognition for a job well done.

Setting the stage for an effective coaching climate involves, first, a performance analysis, and second, agreement on what the job entails. To determine a performance analysis, the coach must have specific data regarding what constitutes the highest level of efficiency for each function. This entails a full, working knowledge of all job functions and systems, as well as knowing people, their abilities and responsibilities. This step will be easy or difficult, depending on the extent that measurable standards of performance already exist. In other words, what does it "look like" when the job is done perfectly?

The next step in analyzing performance is to rate each employee in terms of his or her ranking on the 0 percent to 100 percent performance standard. The coach must ask with regard to each employee: How well is he or she doing? What does the job require? What is the employee actually doing? The issue is not how well the individual is doing in terms of what the coach thinks his or her potential might be, but rather, how well the employee is doing in terms of what the job requires.

Remember that the purpose of coaching and developing is to improve performance. Therefore, the performance assessment is only a means to an end. The coach can start to define the major areas of performance in need of improvement, along with the areas of strength that the employee has demonstrated.

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The next step is to communicate this information to the employee and establish a contract, a complete, mutual understanding and game plan for the growth and development of the employee. Due to individual differences, coaching sessions should ensure that each employee understands exactly what is expected initially and in the future. This must include follow-up meetings and review sessions to determine whether there is, in fact, understanding and accomplishment.

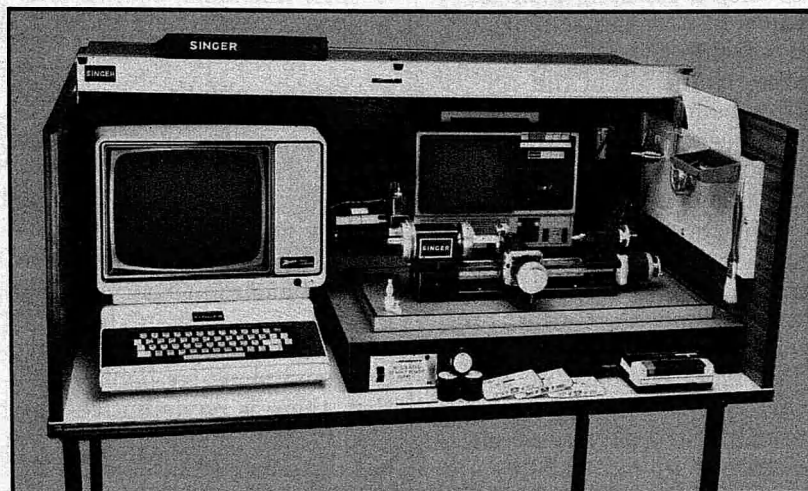
Once the employee knows what is expected, is properly trained and has "bought into" the plan, he or she must have an opportunity to perform—without having the coach closely directing or controlling every move. At this point, the coach demonstrates his or her confidence in and support of the employee. This is vital in creating an atmosphere wherein the employee is accountable for his or her performance and where the coach supports the employee's efforts to contribute and develop. The coach's role at this point is to provide recognition, follow-up and feedback.

The coach must recognize that the employee probably will not perform perfectly at the first attempt and must be given time to progress. When an initial subgoal is attained, the coach must provide recognition and feedback. The next goal should be set at this time. By following this format, the employee can see his or her progress and get feedback from the coach.

During these two steps, the employee is agreeing to take a risk, a common barrier to personal growth. It is the coach's role to remove this barrier and to create an environment where workers can risk and grow safely, without fear of reprisal or repercussions? A worker needs to know he or she can go to the coach and get help.

Reward or recognition is the most powerful tool a coach has. Every adult wants to know, "What's in it for me? If no one really cares, why should I risk? try? perform?" Coaching involves

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leading, urging, discussing, encouraging and some showing, but a minimum of directing or telling. Help is primarily in the form of providing an environment conducive to person-to-person discussion, explanation, listening with genuine interest, trying to understand problems and doubts, trying to clarify situations and problems and discussing with the objective

of increasing understanding.

The coach's job is to teach the worker a thought process by which after counseling, the worker can solve his or her own problems. This is not accomplished through a classroom/training technique. When the coach models the behavior in personal, one-on-one counseling sessions, he or she allows the

worker to learn through application. As Malcolm Knowles points out in his andragogical principles, adults learn best by doing.

The coaching plan

Prior to a coaching session, the coach should review the situation and develop a coaching plan—a procedure to help the employee realize an objective. It must vary according to the job of the employee being coached, and to some degree, according to the relationship between the coach and the employee.

Each worker must be afforded the same opportunity for improvement. Most coaches will put the greatest amount of effort on the poor performers, while some will place more emphasis on their best workers. The coach has a certain number of players on his or her team; they must all be high-level performers to win a championship.

The coaching plan involves four steps, and the parameters of these steps will often overlap. Part of several steps can occur simultaneously. The plan should be flexible and must be applied on an individual basis according to need.

The first step is to establish mutual understanding of the employee's responsibilities, standards or current problems, or a combination of these. This first area of agreement, then, is concerned with what work the employee does.

The second step is to have joint appraisal of what the worker is now doing—a discussion of the current status of the work being performed, his or her handling of problems and the hurdles facing the worker. Agreement in the second area is concerned with how well the worker does the work.

The third step involves a joint discussion for developing a plan for improvement. This can include solving specific problems, handling certain situations, overcoming known barriers and gaining further knowledge. The coach's goal in this step is to have the employee develop an individual plan for improvement and to reach an agreement about

how to measure this improvement.

Step four is to help the employee execute the plan. This is accomplished through reaching a mutual agreement and understanding in the first three steps and by closing out the planning session with a sequence of events, timetable, checkpoints, alternative paths and a follow-up date to review progress.

Coaching pitfalls

Beware of potential drawbacks:

- In the first steps of coaching, in reaching agreement on how an individual is to be measured, often no clearly defined standards of performance exist.

- Without improvement objectives and plans for implementation, there is no definitive way to identify how much improvement has occurred. It has been validated repeatedly that employees will attain the greatest performance improvement when specific, measurable goals are established and an actual plan for achieving these goals is agreed upon.

- When the coach assumes a subjective, rather than an objective role, addressing his or her own priorities, ambitions and needs, the judgmental role will create a win/lose atmosphere. This is a sure way to build barriers and create a credibility gap between the coach and the team member.

The coach must be totally supportive and reflective; he or she does nothing to the worker.

- Coaching sessions held prior to wage increases can emphasize salary rather than performance. Coaches would be well advised to hold coaching sessions after, and more often than, salary reviews.

- Emphasis on negatives, on things not accomplished and on mistakes made will only be detrimental.

Seven rules for good coaching

There are seven criteria to becoming a good coach. First, a sincere, unselfish interest in helping and wanting an employee to grow on the job is essential. The coach must believe that every

member of the team contributes to the total efficiency of the department.

Second, to conduct an effective coaching session, the coach must develop a game plan.

Third, the coach must earn and maintain team respect. This can be best accomplished by credibility (keeping your word with the team members); an empathetic understanding of each worker; an ability to listen with interest and comprehension; and an ability to explain and communicate effectively.

Fourth, remember people learn best by doing. A team member must have an opportunity to participate in the development of a plan for improvement and to claim ownership of it. Next, the worker must have the opportunity to perform. An actively pursued effort by both the coach and worker will bring about the most productive results.

Fifth, throughout the entire effort and within the actual coaching sessions or on the job, the worker will have problems and questions. The coach must ask questions that enable the worker to find solutions.

Sixth, when the plan is in place and the objective is clearly identified, subgoals must be established, allowing gradual progress.

Seventh, the coach should expect mistakes and benefit from them. The first efforts on the part of the worker will probably not be totally successful. When a mistake occurs, there must also be some learning on the part of the worker. This will help uncover the cause and ensure that it doesn't happen again. Mistakes are a part of the real world and can be costly. To minimize their negative effects, use mistakes as learning experiences and growth opportunities.

