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4 Reasons Managers Should Spend More Time on Coaching

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There are managers who coach and managers who don't. Leaders in the latter category are not necessarily bad managers, but they are neglecting an effective tool to develop talent. We've been researching managers who coach and what distinguishes them. What has stood out in our interviews with hundreds of managers who do coach their direct reports is their mindset: They believe in the value of coaching, and they think about their role as a manager in a way that makes coaching a natural part of their managerial toolkit. These are not professional coaches. They are line and staff leaders who manage a group of individuals, and they are busy, hard-working people. So why do they so readily give coaching an important place in their schedule? Here are four reasons:

They see coaching as an essential tool for achieving business goals. They are not coaching their people because they are nice — they see personal involvement in the development of talent as an *essential* activity for business success. Most managers will tell you that they don't have the time to coach. However, time isn't a problem if you think coaching is a "must have" rather than a "nice to have." Whether it's because they are competing for talent, operating in a highly turbulent market place, trying to retain their budding leaders, or aiming to grow their solid players, they believe that they simply *have* to take the time to coach.

There are two assumptions behind this belief. First, that extremely talented people are hard to find and recruit. If you are known as a manager who will help those people thrive, they will gravitate to you. Second, that an organization cannot be successful on the backs of the extremely talented alone. You need solid players just as you need stars, and they will need a manager's help to build skills and deal with the changing realities of their marketplace.

They enjoy helping people develop. These managers are not unlike artists who look at material and imagine that something better, more interesting, and more valuable could emerge. They assume that the people who work for them don't necessarily show up ready to do the job, but that they will need to learn and grow to fulfill their role and adapt to changing circumstances. Coaching managers see this as an essential part of their job. They believe that those with the highest potential, who can often contribute the most to a business, will need their help to realize their often-lofty ambitions. As one manager told us recently, "Isn't helping others to be more successful one of the key roles of a manager?"

The manager must adapt his or her style to the needs and style of each particular individual. This of course takes a good deal of work on the part of the manager, but again, this is perceived as being part of the job, not a special favor.



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They are curious. Coaching managers ask a lot of questions. They are genuinely interested in finding out more about how things are going, what kinds of problems people are running into, where the gaps and opportunities are, and what needs to be done better. Typically, they don't need to be taught how to ask questions because it's a natural strength. This curiosity facilitates the coaching dialogue, the give-and-take between coach and learner in which the learner freely shares his or her perceptions, doubts, mistakes, and successes so that they together reflect on what's happening.

They are interested in establishing connections. As one coaching manager stated, "That is why someone would listen to me, because they believe that for that time, I really am trying to put myself in their shoes." This empathy allows the coaching manager to build an understanding of what each employee needs and appropriately adjust his or her style. Some employees might come to coaching with a "Give it to me straight, I can take it" attitude. Others need time to think and come to their own conclusions. A trusting, connected relationship helps managers better gauge which approach to take. And coaching managers don't put too much stock in the hierarchy. As a coaching manager recently told us, "We all have a job to do, we're all important, and we can all be replaced. Ultimately, no one is above anyone else. We just need to work together to see what we can accomplish."

Achieving this mindset is doable. It comes down to whether the business case is sufficiently compelling to motivate a manager to develop a coaching mindset. Managers need to ask themselves a few questions: Does your organization (or group or team) have the talent it needs to compete? If not, why not? Have you done a poor job hiring, or are people not performing up to their potential? It's really either one or the other. If the latter is true, it's your job to help get them to where they need to be.

For managers who want to start coaching, one of the first steps is to find someone who is a good coach in your organization and ask her or him to tell you about it. What do they do? Ask why they coach. Listen and learn.

Second, understand that before you start coaching, you need to develop a culture of trust and a solid relationship with the people you will be coaching. In spite of your good intentions, all the techniques in the world will make little difference if those you are trying to coach don't feel connected to you in some way. The relationship you develop is more important than all of the best coaching methods that are available.

Third, learn some of the basic principles of managerial coaching that will help you develop your own expertise as a coach. One of the core lessons for managers is that coaching isn't always about telling people the answer. Rather, it is more about having a conversation and asking good, open-ended questions that allow the people you are coaching to reflect on what they are doing and how they can do things differently in the future to improve performance.

Finally, the mindset should be focused on the people you are coaching. Always remember the main principle: coaching is about them, not about you.