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High Performance through Coaching

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For over a decade I have been coaching people, mostly managers and executives, to achieve high performance. In this article I want to share some of my experience about the coaching process. However before starting there's a need to clarify what I mean by coaching because, like leadership, there are many views about what the term means.

For some commentators coaching means helping a person become more proficient in some task or process. For me this is a description of training not coaching. There is certainly debate about the differences between coaching and mentoring, with some commentators seeing the terms as interchangeable. The following quotes fit with my view of the meaning of coaching and the distinction between coaching and mentoring –

According to Cummings and Worley ¹ "... coaching is a development process whereby an individual meets on a regular basis to clarify goals, deal with potential stumbling blocks and improve their performance. It is an intervention that is highly personal and generally involves a one-on-one relationship between coach and client..."

Whitmore² refers to the original source of the term mentor being this –

"The word originates from Greek mythology, in which it is reported that Odysseus, when setting out for Troy, entrusted his house and the education of his son Telemachus to his friend, Mentor, 'tell him all you know,' Odysseus said..."

Here is the older, more experienced Mentor giving the son the benefit of his wisdom and know how. In many business situations a mentor is someone older and more experienced passing on their knowledge to a younger colleague. The critical distinction for me is in Mentor being instructed to *"tell him"* whereas a good coach proceeds by asking questions.

Developmental v Remedial Coaching

When I'm called in by the CEO, a GM or the HR Manager to provide coaching the first thing I need to understand is whether I'm being asked to provide developmental or remedial coaching. Developmental coaching essentially is helping a good performer become a high performer. Remedial coaching is being asked to change behaviours and results for an underperformer. Sometimes remedial coaching is just another step the organisation is taking towards a goal of having the underperformer leave, as in *"we're sorry but we've tried everything to help you and you still don't meet our standards so..."*.



Before I commit to remedial coaching I need to be sure the organisation definitely wants this person to succeed.

Developmental coaching is a great opportunity to help someone who is good just get better.

High Performance

Coaching should be about unlocking the potential inherent in the person being coached. So the focus should be on future performance not past performance.

Research across a wide range of people who have received coaching shows that on average the extent of an individual's true potential that is actually released in the workplace is about 40%². This means that many individuals could improve their performance by up to 60%.

If you could team up with a good coach and increase your performance by just 20% the benefits would include –

- greater mastery of your current role
- better results for your organisation
- improved career prospects and
- depending on how you use the increased potential, better work/life balance

Ask don't Tell

As the definition above shows, the purpose of coaching is “*to clarify goals, deal with potential stumbling blocks and improve... performance*”. A poor coach will tackle this by attempting to instruct you on what would be clearer goals for you and what action you should take to deal with stumbling blocks and improve performance. The problem with this approach is that the person being coached does not own the result and so has no real accountability for the outcomes.

An effective coach uses a different model, questioning you about your goals, potential barriers and how you propose to improve your performance. This requires you to think carefully about your goals and options which becomes a deep learning experience and at the conclusion you, not the coach, own accountability for your future actions.

The coaching model I prefer for most situations is GROW². This stands for –

- Goals: Setting your goals.
- Reality: Reviewing the likely impact of the real world on your goals.
- Options: What range of options is available to help you reach your goals.
- What is to be done, When, by Whom and your Will to make it happen.



This model requires the person being coached to think deeply about these four steps, to make choices and to commit to action. The objective for the coach is to help you unlock your inner potential. To do this the coach asks a lot of questions to help you focus your thinking. Note that the coach is not telling you what to do but instead is asking you questions which require you to think about a variety of possible responses and to explain what you think is the best course to follow.

Choosing a Coach

When you're choosing a coach keep these points in mind –

- It's very important to understand that the coaching relationship is a very personal one. The chemistry between you must be really good so that you feel comfortable sharing your problems and difficulties.
- It's not important that your coach should have worked in your industry. It is vital that you spend some time with your prospective coach before signing a contract so you can judge whether you think this is the right person to help you.

In this preliminary discussion explore what method or methods the coach proposes to employ in working with you. Whatever the method, make sure it is based on pressing you to stretch your thinking and judgement, not on telling you how to do stuff.

In choosing a business coach make sure he or she has had strong experience not just as a coach but as a manager or executive in a range of senior roles. Unfortunately there are coaches around who have obtained a certificate but whose personal experience in significant organisational roles is very limited and in some cases non-existent.

Also look for certain qualities in your coach, is she/he –

- a good listener, whose responses to your questions show good understanding of your concerns
- a patient person, prepared to spend time helping you work through issues rather than pushing conclusions at you
- interested in you as an individual
- using a coaching structure or methodology that make sense to you

Is this Confidential?

I've seen a case where an organisation provided what it said was strictly confidential support from an external psychologist for any staff member and yet the HR Manager expected detailed feedback from the psychologist about anyone seeking help.

If you're engaging a coach you need to understand whether your discussions will be completely confidential. At times when I'm retained by a senior executive to coach a team member it is expected that I will provide some feedback. I make it clear that I'm happy to provide general feedback on progress towards agreed goals but that the details of the



discussions between me and the person I'm coaching will remain strictly confidential. I'm also transparent about this with the person I coach.

Mapping a Path

At the start of a coaching process I want the person I'm coaching to specify what she wants to achieve from the process. Once this is clear I put this in writing and get her to confirm that my understanding is correct.

Now we both have a path to follow and agreed results to achieve from the coaching. This is a really important step because without this clear initial agreement the coaching process is in danger of following a wandering path that does not add strong value.

Taking the Journey

A good example of this concept of "ask, don't tell" and the GROW model concerns a level 2 executive I coached. She was having quite a lot of difficulty managing up. At each coaching session she would explain the problem she was currently having dealing with her boss and ask me what she should do. My response always was to ask her –

- What do you need to achieve from this current exchange with your boss - your Goal?
- What is the Reality that could impact achieving this e.g. personality issues, availability of resources, organisational politics, and external factors?
- Given your goal and this reality what viable Options are available to you?
- Which option do you think it would be best to pursue, when do you plan to act on this and how committed are you to taking this action?

Of course there were a lot more questions and discussion involved but this illustrates the key steps. Importantly by following this process the person I was coaching reflected on the situation, worked through the issues and chose a course of action which she then owned. When she initially asked me what she should do I could have told her what I would do but she would have learned little from this.

In coaching I like to use a combination of reflective thinking and action learning. Reflective thinking is helped by the questioning process and at the end of each coaching session I ask the person I'm coaching to agree to act on something we have worked through before our next meeting. This introduces action learning and we start the next coaching session with a debrief on the results obtained from different actions implemented since we last met. Coaching is an extremely effective way of breaking through barriers to achieve high performance. It is not about instruction or training. It is all about unlocking your inner potential.

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1. Cummings, Thomas G and Worley, Christopher G (2009) Organization development & change, 9th ed., Cengage.
 2. Whitmore John (2003) Coaching for Performance 3rd ed., Nicholas Brealey Publishing. London.

