

## **Exponential Consulting Leadership Topic**

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### **Coaching for Results**

By Stephen Billing

Coaching of your team is one of those things that, while important, is never urgent. In other words, while it is important in terms of developing your people, it is one of those things that doesn't have a deadline. What I mean by this is that coaching is high on importance but low on urgency. Except at performance review time, there is seldom a deadline for when you must give feedback and coach members of your team. It is entirely up to you.

Consequently, coaching your team members often takes a back seat to other day to day demands, such as covering absences, handling complaints, dealing with performance issues such as lateness, responding to demands from the boss, and a million day to day emergencies.

I am sure you can tell that I want to urge you to prioritise your coaching. But why is this so?

Well, coaching and developing your people is an important longer term aim that you must have as a manager. There is an old line that if you are not developing your people then you are becoming indispensable which means that you cannot be promoted. If you develop your people so that they can do more of the work, then there is less demand on you, and your people are helping their own careers. It's win / win all round, but in spite of that, coaching and developing direct reports still seems to be last on the list of things to do.

Overcoming this is a personal decision for you as a manager. Is developing your people a priority? I have briefly made the case above that you should make it a priority, and the rest of this article is based on the assumption that you wish to make it so, and are wondering how.

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According to Lominger International, the 70/20/10 rule applies. 70% of reported skill development comes from challenging, uncomfortable work assignments. You probably have experienced this yourself – your greatest development may well have come from times you were “thrown in the deep end” and had to produce a result. 20% of skill development comes from coaching and feedback from others and 10% comes from training, reading and course work. While I could argue with some of the finer points of this analysis, I think that the main point is valid: that coaching from a significant person has a major impact on skills and career development. In other words, you have every opportunity to be the amazing coach for others that you have no doubt experienced in your own career development.

## What is Coaching

The description of coaching that I find useful when I’m working on developing coaching skills for managers is that, as a manager, coaching is about the spontaneous and planned development of individuals and teams to improve performance and achieve results. I learnt this definition of coaching when I worked for US consulting firm Omega Performance. This is a useful description of coaching for those seeking to develop their coaching skills because it frames the coaching task as one of working with people in groups and as individuals to improve their work performance.

It is interesting that it is common for managers to say that they spend their time coaching but that staff say that they don’t receive coaching. Recently I had a person in one of my coaching workshops say she had never been coached and then later go on to describe a situation in which her manager had clearly been trying to coach her! It seems that the intensity of the manager’s attempts to coach are not reflected in the staff member’s recognition of coaching received.

Nevertheless, most people would say they would benefit from their managers doing such things as:

- Giving more encouragement.
- Providing more guidance about what is expected
- Being more available for questions
- Giving more examples of good practice.

All of the above can easily be incorporated as components of good coaching.

I think that the heart of good coaching is about observing people and providing feedback. When you have observed what is going on your feedback has more credibility and is not open to challenge. Many managers are challenged when asked to think of three things they could observe on a daily basis about their staff. Can you think of two things you could observe that you are not currently observing? What about your customer interactions. Are you observing what takes place between your team members and their internal or external customers? Are you reviewing and

providing feedback on written materials they produce, such as documents, reports or emails?

## **The Self Discovery Approach**

I have been an advocate of the self discovery approach in coaching, ever since I came across it when I worked at Omega Performance [www.omegaperformance.com](http://www.omegaperformance.com), and I probably was already a devotee before that too.

The idea is that the coaching process is about assisting the other person to self-discover information about their performance that they didn't previously know. The key technique is encapsulated in the phrase "Ask first, then tell." This is a good principle to apply in a variety of coaching situations, whether planned or spontaneous. In a spontaneous or quick coaching situation, before you offer your own opinion, ask them a question such as "What would you do?" or "What options do you see?" In a planned coaching situation, once you have agreed the agenda (that includes the outcomes you and the other person wish to achieve) then ask for their perspective on the matter at hand, prior to offering your own opinion.

When identifying potential solutions, ask for the other person's ideas before stating your own.

In so many coaching situations, "Ask first, then tell" is an excellent principle on which to operate.

## **Spontaneous Coaching Opportunities**

It is fine to think about coaching as a planned process in which you have rehearsed the conversation. But frequently your coaching opportunities come out of the blue, often in the form of questions from your team members. In answering these questions you have the dilemma of deciding how to answer them. Some ways of answering questions simply encourage your team members to keep coming to you rather than solving future questions for themselves. Basically you have recourse to three types of answers to a question from those you coach:

- Provide the answer.
- Take the job off them and do it yourself.
- Collaborate in coming up with a joint solution to the particular issue.

The first two options have the advantage of being quicker. The first has the disadvantage that it teaches your team members that you will answer questions and encourages them to come to you with further questions rather than seeking answers for themselves. And even if you tell them what to do, that doesn't mean that what you say is what will actually happen. The second has the disadvantage of adding to your own workload. The more you do this the less your team members will be inclined to and able to do for themselves.

So you are always having to make judgment calls as to which way to handle giving your response. In terms of handling the situation you have to consider the other person's willingness, ability and confidence.

These are at best predictions, so make your best judgment of the situation, make your decision about how to handle it and then take it from there. Even if you instruct them in what to do, you won't necessarily get the result you want. In other words, decide how to respond and then adapt, react and respond to events as they unfold. Most of the time you won't hear another thing – the situation will be resolved. If something goes wrong or needs to be amended, then you can adapt as you go. The future of world civilisation does not usually depend on your decisions, and adapting as you go works well.

### **Giving Corrective Feedback**

Sometimes it is your job to give feedback to someone else, and let's face it, they are not going to welcome the feedback with open arms.

Here are five steps that are a useful way to approach giving corrective feedback.

1. Acknowledge something specific that is working well, e.g. "Your efforts to improve your writing are really paying off".
2. Describe the behaviour – stick to "undeniable facts" and what you've observed. Don't report what others are saying, unless it's customer feedback.
3. Explain the impact of the behaviour.
4. Ask first, then tell, for solutions.
5. Agree next steps.

### **Conclusion**

Coaching is one of those activities that creates potential breakthroughs. But it rarely has a deadline, except for the priority you give it. So you have to be quite proactive about it and think it's important, otherwise you will find that you never get around to it. Think of someone in your working life who you regard as a good coach. This is the kind of manager you too can be for your people, but only if you make it a priority to coach and develop your people.