

How to Take Your Coaching Skills Up a Notch by Daniel Markovitz

Are there any coaches or teachers in your background that you cherish and think of often? If so, I'd be willing to bet that they are from your youth—and not supervisors or managers from your work life. Even in companies that pride themselves on making coaching an essential part of each manager's job, the quality and impact of corporate coaching seldom compares to our formative coaching experiences. Great coaches—the ones who shape lives—share some common characteristics.

They provide continuous, on-site observation. Great coaches go and see first-hand how an athlete performs at practice and in games, so they have up-to-date knowledge of each individual's current situation. They use these direct observations to provide continuous feedback and to address specific shortcomings.

They have a structured, long-range plan for each individual. It's not just about winning the next game or race. Great coaches aim for the long-term, teaching their athletes progressively more complex skills—or, in the case of endurance sports, gradually building up the athlete's strength, endurance and speed.

They connect the individual to a greater purpose. Usually, this greater purpose is the accomplishment of the larger team goal. The athlete recognizes that she isn't only training for individual glory; in fact, individual success is secondary, and often subsumed, to attainment of the overall team goal.

In contrast, the typical manager/coach tends to operate as follows:

Infrequent observation. Most managers don't see and therefore can't observe their direct reports every day. Unfortunately, research shows that sporadic coaching—even if the interactions are lengthy—is far less effective than shorter, frequent sessions.

Ad hoc coaching. High-potential employees often have long-range development plans to lead them to the executive suite. But what about the rank and file—people who aren't considered superstars? These employees are typically coached only when there is a need for corrective action.

It's all about the individual. The fact is, a company—or any organization, for that matter—is no less a team than an NHL hockey team. And yet, coaching in a business setting almost exclusively focuses on the benefits that accrue to the individual learner, rather than to the organization as a whole.

There is one point of commonality between athletic and workplace coaches: Both rely heavily upon *directive* coaching rather than *developmental* coaching. In directive coaching, the coach advocates for a certain course of action: 'Run the play this way, not that way'; 'Format your spreadsheet like this, not like that'. Basically, the coach is doing the thinking. Directive coaching is most useful when you want rapid action (for instance, in the middle of a game) and when the problem being addressed is simple.

By contrast, developmental coaching is more Socratic. The developmental coach asks questions that lead the individual to greater awareness and understanding. In this dynamic, the learner is prompted to do most of the thinking. Develop-

mental coaching is more effective when you're trying to create long-term behavioural change or solve complex problems.

Unfortunately, most workplace coaching today is directive: 'Jane, I think you should address it in this manner'; 'Jose, what if you tried doing it this way?' This is a shame, because directive coaching fails to take advantage of the greater cognitive capabilities of adult learners.

So, how can you become a coach and mentor that people will remember throughout their careers?

1. **Follow the athletic coach's lead and make time to provide consistent observation.** The best workplace coaches observe people in their natural environment on a regular basis, so they can see for themselves what the person is doing well—and not as well.
2. **Take a long-range view of employee development.** Rather than coaching for correction, adopt a proactive approach. Treat each person as a lifetime employee, and consider the skills that will be needed over an entire career.
3. **Create a long-term learning plan that strategically builds skills and experiences.** Even if the employee doesn't stay until retirement (and today, it's unlikely that he/she will), you will reap the benefits of a more motivated, and capable, worker.
4. **Connect the employee's development to the welfare of your organization as a whole.** In the case of a team sport, the 'why' is obvious to players, but it's not always obvious to employees in an organization. If the individual's

development can be connected to the welfare of the organization as a whole, the behavioural changes will be more likely to stick.

5. **Know that the greatest gift a coach can provide is the ability to adapt and learn.** Since we can't know what skills will be needed in the future, a general approach to problem solving is the keystone skill to achieving challenging goals throughout our lives.

The athletic coaches of our youth and our favourite teachers will live forever in our hearts. By adopting some of the core features of those relationships and emphasizing the developmental coaching mindset, you can take steps to elevate the typically uninspiring workplace coaching function.



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