

Growing Greatness®:
Series of Articles to Cultivate Truly Outstanding Leaders

Coaching for Improved Performance

By
Karen Lawson, PhD, CSP



1365 Gwynedale Way
Lansdale, PA 19446

(215) 368-9465
(215) 393-8072 Fax
E-Mail: KLawson@LawsonCG.com
Web site: <http://www.GrowingGreatness.com>

Coaching for Improved Performance

By Karen Lawson, PhD, CSP
President, Lawson Consulting Group, Inc.

Criteria for Success:

Successful coaches in business as in sports are great influencers. They know how to bring out the best in others. They also know that it is an on-going process and a primary responsibility.

Coaching is one of the most critical skills to be mastered by today's manager. Why is coaching so important? Today's environment has created more pressure to do more with less. The key to reducing pressure is to make the most of your most valuable resource - people. The goal of this module is to help managers, supervisors, or co-workers coach employees to overcome barriers or hurdles and improve performance. This innovative approach to solving performance problems presents a coaching

model and creative coaching techniques for managers to use in creating a supportive environment and addressing individual differences, including language, culture, age, and value systems.

What You Should Know Before Getting Started

Why Do You Need to Know About Coaching?

Criteria for Success: Successful coaches in business as in sports are great influencers. They know how to bring out the best in others. They also know that it is an on-going process and a primary responsibility.

Criteria for Success: Successful coaches in business as in sports are great influencers. They know how to bring out the best in others. They also know that it is an on-going process and a primary responsibility.

- High performing employees will help you reduce the anxiety and stress of increasing responsibilities and multiple responsibilities.
- Coaching is the most effective way of developing your employees.
- Improved employee performance leads to increased productivity and bottomline results.
- Employees experience increased self-esteem and job satisfaction.

Criteria for Success:

Successful coaches in business as in sports are great influencers. They know how to bring out the best in others. They also know that it is an on-going process and a primary responsibility.

Watch Out For...

Keep in mind that coaching takes time. It involves real commitment and a desire to participate actively in the employee's development. Throughout the coaching process, it is important to keep in mind that the main objective is to improve performance. Managers need to guard against jumping to early conclusions when they identify a performance problem. As with any problem-solving process, the first and often the most difficult step is to identify clearly what the problem is.

The Process of Coaching Your Employees

To understand the coaching process, we will look at the following areas:

- Definition of coaching
- Qualities, characteristics, and skills of effective coaches
- Coaching behaviors
- Coaching process
- Feedback
- Rewards

Defining coaching

- Coaching is an on-going process designed to help the employee gain greater competence and overcome barriers to improving performance.
- Coaching differs from training, which is a structured process to provide employees with the knowledge and skills to perform job tasks.
- Coaching is appropriate when the person has the ability and knowledge but performance has dropped and he or she has not met expectations.

- Coaching involves a change in behavior. The idea is to move the employee from where he or she is to where you want him or her to be.
- Coaching is not the same as counseling. Counseling is problem solving directed at personal issues that are affecting or have the potential to affect performance. Very often counseling involves personal problems such as marital and family problems, substance abuse, and emotional and psychological barriers. The manager should not try to counsel but should serve as a resource person, directing the employee to a skilled practitioner for further professional help.

To get the most from this module, take a moment and identify an employee whose performance you would like to improve through coaching. You will work with this example as you move through the program.

Identifying qualities, characteristics, and skills of effective coaches

Studies show that effective coaches share certain personal qualities and characteristics, such as the following:

- Patience
- Enthusiasm
- Honesty and integrity
- Friendliness
- Genuine concern for others
- Self-confidence
- Fairness
- Consistency
- Flexibility
- Resourcefulness

To be successful, coaches need to develop the following skills and abilities:

- Communicating
- Listening
- Questioning
- Setting goals and objectives
- Establishing appropriate priorities
- Analyzing
- Relating to people at all levels
- Planning and organizing

Take a moment to highlight those qualities and skills you feel you already have. Then identify those you would like to develop further.

Modeling coaching behavior

In addition to qualities, characteristics, and skills, as an effective manager/coach you need to demonstrate certain behaviors. Using the acronym COACH, we will review the following behaviors. Try to relate each one to yourself and your own situation.

Collaborate. The coaching relationship is a collaborative one. You need to work with the employee to identify the performance problem, set standards and performance objectives, and develop a performance improvement plan. It becomes a matter of how can WE solve the problem.

Own. You need to examine your own behavior and accept some ownership for the problem along with the employee. Ask yourself: “Did I make my expectations clear?” “Did I provide the proper training?” “Does the employee have the appropriate tools to do the job?”

Acknowledge. As we will look at later, you need to acknowledge successes through reinforcement and also acknowledge an employee’s problems, feelings, and concerns. This last point is tricky. Acknowledging problems and concerns is not the same as overlooking them or allowing them excuse behavior that is not at an acceptable level. For example, you can certainly understand an employee’s difficulty in juggling the multiple responsibilities of both home and work. However, the resulting chronic absenteeism or tardiness cannot be allowed to continue.

Communicate. This is probably the most important behavior and the one most managers seem to find the most difficult. As we noted in the above lists, communication skills including listening, questioning, giving and receiving feedback are critical for success. You need to practice two-way communication on a daily basis. In particular, you need to clarify your expectations.

Help. As a manager, you are not only a coach but an advisor, serving as a resource

person and a guide to other resources, both inside and outside the organization. In addition to giving help, you should also be seeking help from your employees. For example, if you need to increase sales, ask your employees to help you develop a marketing plan or at least solicit their ideas. You will be surprised how creative and innovative people can be if you give them a chance.

Following the coaching process

Anyone can learn to be a coach. By applying the following step-by-step process, you will improve the performance of individual team members and get the results you want.

Step One: Problem Identification. The coach describes the current undesirable performance-related behavior that is observable, measurable, non-judgmental and can be changed. Telling someone he/she has a “bad attitude” is not descriptive - it’s judgmental. Try to eliminate the word “attitude” from your thought process when dealing with employee performance. A simple example is the employee who is frequently late. In describing this unacceptable behavior to the employee, you cite specific documented dates and time periods that you have observed. Be careful not to rely on hearsay.

Using the employee you identified earlier as a case example, describe the current behavior including the situation and the person’s actions. Remember to be as specific as possible and focus on behavior not attitude.

Step Two: Employee Response. Give the employee an opportunity to explain or question. Use open-ended questions such as “What do you think is the problem?” “What is keeping you from getting to work on time?” In the tardiness case, the employee may give the standard excuses or may reveal a real problem preventing him or her from getting to work on time.

Make a list of open-ended questions you could ask your employee in order to unearth any underlying problems or extenuating circumstances. Brainstorm some possible reasons your case employee may give you. Of course, when you really deal with this individual, be aware that you may hear things you hadn’t anticipated and keep your mind open to other possibilities.

Step Three: State Expectations. As a coach you need to state clearly what you expect of the employee. For example, the manager of the tardy employee restates that he expects the employee to be at her work station and ready to work by 9:00 am. The use of empathy is very important at this stage. You might begin by saying, “I understand that it must be difficult for you to manage all your responsibilities; however, the fact remains that you are expected to be here on time and you haven’t been doing so.”

Again, for the sake of this exercise, state very specifically what you expect the employee to do or not to do. Include an empathy statement.

Step Four: Get Agreement. This step is also tricky because the employee may try various ways to dodge the issue and accept no responsibility for his or her own behavior. Your careful documentation will be of invaluable support here. Through two-way communication, you and the employee should agree on the problem and the impact it has on the organization and others. If the person is frequently late, that action places additional burden on others. It also creates resentment that affects the entire office environment.

With your case employee, identify the impact of that person’s behavior on others or on your operation.

Step Five: Improvement Plan. This step is critical. You and your employee must collaborate to identify clearly the desired behavior. It will be very tempting just to “lay down the law” and tell the employee what he or she should do. The two of you should establish goals that are specific, realistic, attainable, simple, and time-bound as well as strategies for overcoming barriers to reach those goals. Once again, use good questioning techniques to get the employee to state what he or she plans to do to solve the problem. To the tardy employee you might ask, “What do you think you can do to make sure you get here on time?” In this manner, you are placing the onus on the employee and making him or her take appropriate ownership. By the same token, you will want to ask what you can do to help. It may be that what the employee wants you to do may not be appropriate or possible. If that’s the case, it’s a good starting point for further discussion and maybe even some negotiation. The employee may offer a solution you had not considered.

What are some open-ended questions you could use with your case employee?

Step Six: Gain Commitment. In this step, the employee commits to changing behavior or improving performance by stating exactly what he/she is going to do to improve the situation. The tardy employee who has difficulty juggling the responsibilities of getting her small children to day care with getting herself ready and to work on time may need to get organized the night before and/or get up earlier. Once you gain agreement and commitment from the employee, ask the employee to summarize the discussion.

How would you determine if the employee has indeed made a real commitment to improving performance?

Step Seven: Set time for next meeting. Before concluding the coaching session, you and the employee will need to agree on a time to meet to discuss progress. The next meeting should give ample time for the individual to practice the new behavior, yet not so long that he/she assumes the matter is forgotten.

With your case example, how long do you think you should wait before the next meeting?

Step Eight: Monitor and Follow-up. It is important to monitor the employee's specific feedback in the form of comments, instructions, and suggestions. For example, the manager reinforces the behavior of the formerly tardy employee by saying, "Joyce, I've noticed that you've been to work on time every day, and I really appreciate the extra effort to make that happen." The coach may suggest how to do something better by saying, "Next time, John, try asking the customer how he/she is going to use the account so that you can offer the appropriate choices." Another example of reinforcing positive behavior may be, "Sandy, you handled that customer well. although you couldn't give her what she wanted, you gave her a choice and allowed her to make her own decision." Immediate praise is a powerful reinforcer. If you want the behavior repeated, you need to let the person know.

Using your case example, write down some ways you could monitor the employee's progress. Remember, however, you are doing this in isolation. In the actual situation, the employee would help determine the appropriate plan of action.

Using feedback

The importance of feedback in the coaching process cannot be stressed enough. Keep in mind the following guidelines for effective feedback:

- Be descriptive rather than evaluative. Describe observable behavior not judgments on your part. Be careful not to put the employee on the defensive.
- Be specific rather than general. Describe the behavior in the context of the actual situation.
- Discuss only behavior the employee can change. Some people have shortcomings over which they have no control.
- Be timely and do it frequently. Hold the discussion at the earliest opportunity after the behavior has occurred.
- Take into account both the employee's needs and the employer's needs. Remember to strive for a win-win situation.
- Communicate clearly. Check for clarity by asking the employee to state his or her understanding of the discussion.
- Do it when the receiver is ready to receive it. Keep in mind that timing is everything.

Recognizing and rewarding positive behavior

Feedback and reinforcement need to be followed with recognition and rewards. Individual recognition teamed with incentive programs can be very effective but should be tied to organizational goals and individual performance and valued by the employee. If, for example, your organization is committed to responding quickly to customers, then you should reward the employee's efficiency in returning phone calls or resolving complaints. That reward could be public praise, special privileges, choices of flex time, schedules, vacations, or tangibles such as gifts, money, plaques, theater tickets. The reward should depend on the person receiving it. The employee with young children may appreciate given more scheduling flexibility whereas someone on a limited income would value the opportunity to work overtime.

List some non-monetary ways you can reward your employees for outstanding performance.

Measuring Success

One of the ways you can measure your coaching success is to solicit feedback from your employees as to how you are doing. One easy and relatively risk-free method is to ask each employee to complete a brief “agree-disagree” questionnaire - anonymously, of course. Your questions (or statements in this case) could include but need not be limited to the following:

My manager...

- frequently tells me how I’m doing.
- gives me both positive and negative feedback.
- tells me what he/she expects of me.
- asks my opinion and involves me in decisions that affect me.
- keeps me informed about changes taking place in the organization.
- does not use threats or intimidation.
- acknowledges my extra effort with some type of praise or recognition.
- takes the time to explain new procedures and makes sure I understand.
- provides the training and resources I need to do my job.
- treats me with respect.
- is not afraid to admit his/her mistakes or to say, “I’m sorry.”

Respond to the list above as you think your employees would respond. Are there any areas you would like to work to improve? Another approach would be for you to respond to the list according to how you see yourself, give the same list to your employees, then compare your self-perception with the perception of others. It could be a real eye-opener. Regardless of the outcome, you now have valuable data that reinforces the positive approach you are already using or identifying areas for improvement.

About the Author

Karen Lawson, PhD, CSP, is an international consultant, executive coach, speaker, and author. She has built a successful organization and management development consulting firm working with Fortune 500 companies as well as small businesses. Dr. Lawson specializes in cultivating outstanding leaders who enable their organizations to outperform the competition. For a complete list of her products and services, contact Lawson Consulting Group, Inc. at 215-368-9465 or at www.LawsonCG.com.

Growth Resources

Seminars and Keynote Speeches:

Leadership
Business Communication
Business Ethics
Team Building
Personal Growth
Training Skills Development
Customer Service

Consulting Services:

Executive Coaching
Group Facilitation
Strategic Planning
Executive Retreats

Growth Tools:

Self-Assessments
Books
Audio CDs and Tapes

Links to Exceptional Resources

Please go these exceptional resources to see how we can work with you to grow great leaders and outperform your competition.

Lawson Consulting Groups main website: www.LawsonCG.com
Leadership website: www.GrowingGreatness.com
Assessment website: www.TACToolsOnline.com