

## **The Five Most Important Qualities in Coaching Your Employees**

**(Anywhere in the World)**

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One of the most challenging responsibilities that a leader/manager must do is to effectively coach their employees. Much has been written on the coaching process in the last twenty years, but little has focused on identifying the critical elements for success. At first glance, many believe that being an effective coach should be inherent or instinctive to a leader. This is untrue for most leaders. For example, Bob, a senior leader with a Chemical company was promoted into a role that required him to lead a ten-person team scattered around the world. His question, given the cultural differences and geographic challenges, what were the key things he needed to do to establish an impactful relationship? To begin, being an effective coach takes intention: it requires the leader/manager to treat coaching in a different manner than most of their other management- focused skills and competencies.

If you have been lucky enough to have experienced a great sports coach as a child (or with your children), you have had exposure to what being a good coach can mean. As with coaching children, it is about encouraging the growth and development of people to help them accomplish goals/levels they thought impossible. After all, we are historically rewarded for providing the answers. In today's high speed, information and change-intensive world, however, "having all the answers" is an impossible task.

In our work around the world, a question frequently asked is: "What are the critical things for a leader to understand to be a good coach?" The five coaching qualities below are those that we recognize as having the most applicability for leaders, globally. Many also apply to "mentoring" relationships.

### **Establish Expectations**

When working with someone within your organization, you should anticipate that there may be concerns about the motive behind "coaching" and that the coachee must believe that (s)he can trust you as a coach. Therefore, if you take the initiative to deal with this potential "challenge" proactively, it will lead to greater results. It also protects you from any confusion between your leader role and your coaching role. What does this look like? It means having an upfront discussion with the person that you want to coach and explaining how you would like to help them. Then, determine if they are open to your help. If there is one thing guaranteed not work, it is trying to coach someone that has no interest in either being coached or being coached by you. Recognize that coaching is a gift that you are willing to give and if they are not willing, just move on. If they are interested, clarify the two roles that you will play. The first is as their manager/leader and the second is as their coach. Indicate that you will mention that this is a "coaching moment" prior to having the discussion. Also, clarify that these discussions will not become part of any evaluation unless progress on the identified area(s) is not visible.

### **This is Not About You, it's About Who You Are Coaching**

In many traditional leader/employee relationships, the focus is on you "as leader" and what the employee needs to do to achieve your and the organization's expectations. All reward systems are based on meeting/exceeding goal expectations. However, when engaging in a coaching relationship, there is a more impactful consideration: the personal and professional growth of the coachee. So, as a

leader/manager, your lens must shift. It becomes about helping the person achieve clarity about what they want to achieve – in all aspects of their life – and then working with them to create a plan to get there. It is about challenging them to grow/develop to allow them to be more effective performers or even, having more satisfying lives. In our experience, great coaching results in coachees attaining levels that they did not believe possible. The true value of a coach is about recognizing what a person wants and is capable of and then galvanizing them to realize it. Hence the reason that your leadership lens must be focused on the coachee. Their growth – professional and personal- is your reward. Set the path, monitor progress and then celebrate success.

### **Avoid the Advice Trap**

Most of us have grown up in the corporate world of leaders who are effective at providing decisions and advice. However, we suggest that for true growth in your coachee, it is more effective to help the person find the solution or decision themselves, rather than providing them with the answer – or advising that they do it your way. It is so critical, our friend Michael Bungay Stanier published a book entitled *The Advice Trap*. We have all heard the Confucius proverb: “Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day. Teach a man to fish and he will eat for a lifetime.” Even if the coachee is looking for your specific answer, they will be better able to handle the next issue that arises, if you take the time to coach them through the solutioning process. While we are all driven to solve problems (it is faster, after all) it is more important to identify what the person really needs. If it is to get advice, great. If not, ask questions to bring clarity and to determine the best direction.

### **Listening and Asking Questions**

Being a great coach is about having the ability to listen and ask questions to achieve clarity. Many coaches believe that they are being hired to give opinions and suggestions. This is true, in part. However, it is the ability to listen and analyze that reaps the greatest return on the coaching investment. There is a reason that “listening” is a common action item on leaders’ “should do it better” lists. Most of us are action-oriented and feel impatient when we “just” sit and listen. It should be noted that listening is more than just paying attention to a coachee’s words. It is about understanding the issue and urgency of what this person is saying and then asking questions and deploying active listening techniques to validate that you have heard and understood these issues. Then and only then, can the two of you come to the best outcome. It is inherent in all human beings to want to be heard. As a coach, leading the coachee to discover and reflect to build conceptual skills and cement learning should be the objective. Listening is also one of the critical signals of your respect. Yet perceived lack of listening remains one of the main reasons that leaders/managers fail to make great coaches.

### **Follow-Up**

We have saved the most important quality for last. A key activity that you should deploy in both your leader/manager and coaching role is to follow-up. Following up ensures that timelines and deliverables are met, and surprises are kept to a minimum. In coaching, follow up is also critical. No matter what the task/activity, follow-up dramatically ensures a favorable outcome. Likewise, coaching without follow-up will likely lead to disappointment. Following up on issues that have been surfaced in coaching sessions demonstrates that you are committed as their coach and as their leader. It is extremely frustrating when requests/issues disappear into a black hole – never to be resurfaced unless done so by the person. To ensure that there is a cadence established for follow-up, we recommend that leaders/managers always set a date for the next coaching session at the end of the current one. Also,

assign the coachee a “homework” assignment during each session and calendar in the specific items to be revisited. It is also important to keep the coaching follow-up sessions separate from the leader/manager regular updates. You can combine the sessions into one but keep a clear separation on the part of the session that is being used for coaching. Remember, like listening, designated time for professional and personal growth demonstrates genuine care and acknowledgement that commitment to self-improvement is both vital and valued.

So, what are the important questions to ask to ensure that you are embodying the most important qualities?

1. Have I been clear on the expectations for myself, the coachee and the objective?
2. Can I turn my focus to the coachee and their needs?
3. Can I shift into listening mode rather than instructing mode?
4. Am I willing to hold the coachee accountable for their commitment—and am I committed to see it through?
5. What is my plan to put follow-up structure in place?

For the leader, Bob, at the global Chemical company, incorporating these qualities did not guarantee success, but given the international and virtual challenges, it did ensure that a foundation was established with his team - and the engagement did not fail. Establishing an intentional process at the start of the coaching relationship allowed Bob and the team to focus on success factors rather than letting cultural differences become the focal point. As Bob continued to become more skilled at deploying the coaching qualities, he established trust with his team, and they performed and were engaged— despite geographic and cultural barriers.

By incorporating these coaching qualities into our leadership behaviours, we will have the opportunity to see our employees thrive – and be rewarded by the leadership legacy we are creating as coaches.