

No Time to Coach

In the time-compressed world of meetings, deadlines, increasing workloads and customer demands, how can a manager devote more time to coaching employees?

By Rob Kramer

An increasingly popular management skillset is to coach employees. Coaching is based on the principle that employees want to learn and grow, and that in many cases they have the ability to solve their own problems. However, in the time-compressed world of meetings, deadlines, increasing workloads and customer demands, when is a manager supposed to give any time to do this coaching stuff?

Embedded within this ideology are assumptions which limit the manager's ability to be an effective leader.

The first assumption is time. This is perhaps the greatest and most easily accepted justification for limiting any leadership practices in the workplace. And, of course, time constraints are real! The key lies in how managers utilize their time, especially when interacting with their employees. A familiar example is that when an employee comes to a manager with a situation or



problem, the typical manager response is to tell the employee what to do to resolve the issue. This strategy, at first, looks good for a variety of reasons: the employee gets an answer that, hopefully, will be helpful; it doesn't take very long for the manager to provide the direction; and the manager can feel good knowing in that he or she was helpful. However, if we look closer at this common exchange between a manager and employee, imbedded within it is a set up for long term time commitments.

The more a manager provides solutions, the more the employee is learning that when he or she has problems, to come to the manager for answers. Herein lies a relationship of dependency, and a long term outcome of an employee regularly needed the attention of his or her manager. A manager may perceive that by giving a quick answer, it sends the employee back to work with a strategy, and frees

the manager up to get back to his or her own work. However, as the dependent nature of the relationship grows, the more the employee relies on the manager, stunting the employee's capacity to develop thinking and problem solving skills for him or herself. This story ties to the age old saying of "give a person a fish and they will eat for a day. Teach a person to fish and they will feed themselves for a lifetime." Lots of short investments of solution-giving may seem easier, but it all add up, both in time, and in the greater problem of now having at least one (if not many) needy employees.

To coach an employee is to help that person learn to be more of a strategic thinker and problem solver. The investment of coaching has tremendous payoffs, as the employee learns autonomy, becoming empowered to act independently and to proactively seek opportunities to help the workplace perform better. This may sound too good to be true, and yet managers who coach find that employee dependency drops, workplace performance improves, and managers actually find themselves with more free time. So how does it work when time is so scarce?

The manager can use a simple three step checklist when scanning the environment for coaching opportunities:

1. *Options*: is there more than one possible solution to the issue this employee has brought to me?
2. *Autonomy*: do I want this person to have more independence and to grow and develop further?
3. *Risk*: are the stakes for this issue such that there is room for error as the employee learns and develops this new skill?

If the manager can answer yes to these three items, then coaching is a great option. Next, the manager must recognize that most good coaching does not happen in formal settings (such as during annual performance reviews). Rather, it occurs during the regular ebb and flow of a busy work day: in hallway conversations, office drop-by's, before or after meetings, and even in the restroom.

A skillful coaching manager recognizes opportunities to coach, and resists the temptation to take over and provide answers. Rather, effective coaching is fueled by asking powerful questions that get the employee to think for him or herself, and by positively and proactively supporting the employee to make his or her own decisions.

Though the process can seem daunting, it starts with a simple shift in mindset; to turn away from always solving problems and being burdened with dependent relationships, and to lean into believing that employees can often solve their own problems if given the space to think for themselves. Employees will appreciate fishing on their own, and managers will love the new found free time!

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