

CUTTINGS

Number 87 August 2010

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The line manager as coach

There is no doubt that coaching is a preferred intervention for many employees. And it is becoming increasingly used by organisations. A CIPD survey identifies that a third of organisations give coaching to all employees, with fewer than 10% reserving it for executives.

Who is delivering all of this coaching? The same survey limits external coaches to about 15% of the activity, with a third reporting that they had and used specialist internal coaches. But fully 85% of respondents say that coaching is delivered by line managers.

What is coached? For fully 40% of organisations, the purpose is performance management, which makes it highly sensible that the line manager is the person responsible for and carrying out the coaching. Clearly, it is the line manager who is responsible for getting the best performance from staff, and coaching is one of the best ways to set people up for success and deliver it.

But, one has to ask: What is the standard of the coaching being delivered? My experience suggests that there are two immediate issues with line manager coaching: time and quality.

Time for coaching

Many managers feel themselves under pressure with task objectives, and view coaching as an added burden on their time. They fail to see that coaching and performance management IS their job, not an additional task to carry out.

We need to help line managers to view their role more strategically; recognising that their primary responsibility is to enable results

through others. This means engaging with their staff to help them achieve the requirements of the job. This is not done in a formal, off the job, one hour long coaching interview as is practiced in a lot of the training courses. It is done in regular 5 minute on the job conversations, where the opportunity for some quick coaching allows the manager to make the links from day to day behaviour to strategic business goals and give immediate feedback on what people are doing to reinforce good practice.

Coaching now becomes a way of managing, not an activity to be scheduled into a busy day.

Quality of coaching

The other key issue for line managers is the quality of their coaching. For many it is an alternative method of telling someone what to do.

There is an inherent difficulty here as well – there is a manager / subordinate relationship which is difficult to overcome. The line manager can never be a truly independent coach in the way an external one can be. But again, if the focus of most coaching is on performance management, there is a clear focus of attention where independence is not necessary.

One of my mentors, Alistair Mant, introduced me to a concept of ternary communication some years ago, which takes away a lot of the conflict inherent in our typical binary communication system (parent-child, teacher-pupil, master-servant, boss-subordinate). The idea is to create a 'third box' which is the agreed 'higher purpose' of the relationship – e.g. 'increase performance', 'develop the business', 'reduce costs'.

The focus on this higher purpose to the conversation moves the focus of our individual positions to one of joint responsibility and role – how can we work together to... This then reduces the potential conflict and feelings of hierarchy, without trying to ignore their existence.

Focus on strengths

A final helpful pointer to line managers who are trying to coach, is to focus more on coaching strengths not fixing weaknesses. Not only is it easier to focus on what people are doing well and getting them to do more of this, it also is more effective. A famous experiment with a bowling team identified that if you coached people on fixing their faults, you increased performance; but if you ignored the mistakes and coached them on doing more of what they did right, their performance increased substantially more.

Training line managers to coach

Managers need help to become effective coaches – and not just in the basic skills of listening, questioning, building rapport and giving feedback. Most managers can easily learn these skills, if they don't already possess them. The main focus of development needs to be on 'why' and 'what' not 'how'. Managers do not need a rigid framework, they need a clear strategic understanding of the role and purpose of coaching in performance and development so they can then allocate the priority and develop their approach.

Coaching at the sharp end, CIPD

Taking the temperature of coaching, CIPD

The line manager as coach, TJ, July 2010

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A bumper collection of thought provokers and quotations...

- ✂ “You would not exist if you did not have something to bring to the table of life.” *Herbie Hancock*
- ✂ “Life is the distance between dreams and reality.” *Leonid S. Sukhorukov*
- ✂ “Write something to suit yourself and many people will like it; write something to suit everybody and scarcely anyone will care for it.” *Jesse Stuart*
- ✂ “The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in seeing through new eyes.” *Marcel Proust*
- ✂ “The world is ruled by letting things take their natural course. It cannot be ruled by going against nature or arrogance.” *Lao Tzu*
- ✂ “The great thing about getting older is that you don't lose all the other ages you've been.” *Madeleine L'Engle*
- ✂ “Nobody can go back and start a new beginning, but anyone can start today and make a new ending.” *Maria Robinson*
- ✂ “Deep listening from the heart is one half of true communication. Speaking from the heart is the other half.” *Sara Paddison*
- ✂ “Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one who gets burned.” *Buddha*
- ✂ “A good listener is not only popular everywhere, but after a while he gets to know something.” *Wilson Mizner*
- ✂ “Your mind will take on the character of your most frequent thoughts” *Marcus Aurelius*
- ✂ “So many of our dreams at first seem impossible, then they seem improbable, and then, when we summon the will, they soon become inevitable.” *Christopher Reeve*
- ✂ “The longer we dwell on our misfortunes, the greater is their power to harm us.” *Voltaire*
- ✂ “The only real prison is fear, and the only real freedom is freedom from fear.” *Aung San Suu Kyi*

Developing Middle Managers

Much pressurised from both sides, middle managers are in the spotlight again. According to some recent surveys, they are not well rated by their organisations – 50% rate middle managers as ‘fair’ or ‘poor’; 54% of senior leaders identify ineffective middle management as the single greatest barrier to achieving corporate goals; and 30% of leaders believe that middle managers are paralysing their organisation.

In the face of these statistics, one has to ask where the answer lies. It is obviously not in further demonising the middle manager. What are senior leaders doing to help their direct reports to step up to the task in hand. No doubt they were involved in the selection process to appoint these managers in the first place.

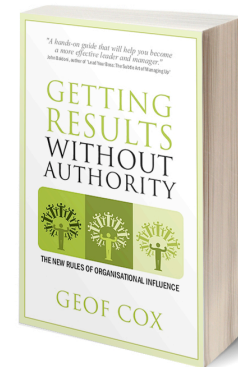
Linking to the lead article, this is a prime target for on the job coaching by the senior leaders. First of all, what about immediately post appointment? Have they invested time and effort to develop the newly appointed middle manager? Or have they assumed that the job of a junior manager is just the same and needs no further development?

With the rapid change of the organisation environment and the pressures of short term objectives, it is highly likely that the job focus of the middle manager has changed, and is changing rapidly. What are senior leaders doing to coach their direct reports to cope with change, align to goals and develop their skills?

My own take on performance management is that if one of a manager's direct reports is not achieving their job objectives, it is the manager's fault, not the employees. The focus of performance management should be to help people to achieve organisation goals not catch them failing. This is what Peter Drucker meant years ago with *Managing By Objectives*.

So how many senior leaders in the above surveys who are rating their direct reports as failing are ranking themselves as ‘good’ or ‘excellent’ performers?

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