

## Coaching and Leadership

### Management development is all about self development!

No matter how upset or angry executives feel, they cannot change the performance or behaviour of another manager. Performance improvement results from identifying the problem, understanding what needs to be done to correct the root of the situation, and then getting on with it. Tough love would indicate: “you did it, you own it, you fix it.” This could be seen as a harsh approach, but it does make the point about who owns the problem and the solution.

Organizations can and do facilitate learning processes for leaders. Learning starts with an orientation to the organization, including the vision, mission, values, and so on. Added to this is the nature and quality of the relationship with one’s manager—for between leaders and their managers exists one of the most powerful training tools: the job itself! Learning the “why’s” and “how’s” about one’s job is the bedrock for performance improvement and development.

Learning is also enhanced by product knowledge, technical training, competency enhancement, and a wide variety of internal and external educational and training opportunities. Many organizations encourage and financially support individual initiatives such as completing a college diploma or university degree.

Unfortunately, the leaders I have coached over many years seem to share one common factor: nobody had clearly outlined the performance difference between their past successes and their current on-the-job behaviour. That is, these leaders did not possess a clear picture of why and where they were not meeting their position’s performance standards. In far too many cases, these individuals learned and functioned as leaders under one set of parameters and expectations; however, when their organization undertook strategic change, they found themselves unable to perform well. It is as though the executives they reported to changed the core business direction but forgot to tell them!

Now, does the leader own this problem? The answer is a qualified “yes.” One is generally not responsible for what one does not know—if not the leader’s manager, then his or her peer groups should have spoken up. But once leaders are aware of the problem, it is their choice—and it is a conscious choice—to take action. One could also hold the view that leaders should have been better attuned to their organization’s realities and seen the changes coming. This presents an ideal starting point for a discussion on coaching.

In order to help us with our discussion, let’s establish a definition of executive coaching. **Executive coaching is an individualized, experiential development process. It expands the leader’s capacity to achieve performance objectives and improves the leader’s ability to demonstrate his or her potential. Coaching represents an intervention into an existing set of human relationships that are based on various organizational systems, both functional and dysfunctional.** As such, “handle with care” is always a good motto!

My practical coaching framework is made up of the following eight points:

- 1) The purpose of coaching is to increase understanding and competencies, and thereby modify on-the-job behaviour. It is not to overhaul the leader’s personality.
- 2) Unless leaders are committed to self-development, no amount of coaching will improve their job performance. Personal intentions and motivation for change are the responsibility of the leader, not the coach. As a coach, one cannot will someone into becoming a better performer.
- 3) No leaders think of themselves as poor performers, so coaches must always be compassionate, understanding, and objective when offering feedback and recommendations.
- 4) Coaches must develop a thorough understanding of their clients’ performance problems. This may include interviews with stakeholders, a review of past performance assessments, and a 360 degree feedback

process. Due diligence in this regard will ensure that the problem does not stem from the leader's manager or a systemic issue within the organization's culture.

- 5) Coaches need to understand where leaders are performing well and not so well, and then work with their strengths to address performance weaknesses. One learns from one's mistakes, but only in a supportive and non-threatening relationship. Beginning with a review of performance achievements will help leaders be more likely to explore their own thought processes (e.g. decision-making), versus taking an immediate "it's their fault, not mine" position.
- 6) Coaching helps leaders learn how to perform better and decide what behaviours to discard. Leaders must understand the nature of positive behaviours, and ideally come to recognize these behaviours in the actions of their executives and their peers. Simply addressing what should not be done, without practical

application, will add little to the leader's skill set.

- 7) A coach should recognize the leader's achievements and accomplishments in order to reinforce positive behaviour. Positive recognition should be consistent with the leader's value system and the culture of the organization.
- 8) Coaches need to support leaders who endeavour to implement positive change. The leader's direct reports are likely to be suspicious and skeptical. If leaders are unsure of their ability to sustain new behaviours, the coach must be there for them.

There are few, if any, quick fixes in coaching. Behavioural change is a complicated process that requires a high level of personal commitment on behalf of the leader. The longer poor performance has occurred, the more time it will take to develop and implement sound solutions.

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