

COACHING CATASTROPHES

By Joanne L. Smikle



While most writing on this subject focuses on the glowing reviews and results garnered from coaching, reality-based managers know that the best efforts can go awry. Even the best-intentioned coaches can face catastrophic results. Sometimes calamities happen because the coach picked the wrong approach, other incidents occur because the timing was off, and others because the person being coached was simply unreceptive. This article examines three common coaching failures, their impacts, and strategies for avoiding them. While the names have been changed, the stories are real. They are drawn from actual experience in various organizational settings.

Catastrophe #1: Giving Up Before the End of the Race

Marge's company launched a coaching initiative as a component of their revised performance management process. The goal was to tap talented employees and provide them with additional skills to reach their fullest potential. The aim goal was to make meaningful linkages between the organization's mission and the day-to-day behavior of all levels of employees.

Marge decided that Irene would be a good employee to build a coaching relationship with. Irene's performance was sporadic. There were lots of days when she was excellent, competent, and customer-focused. And there were other days when she was seemingly lazy, highly involved in the rumor mill, and disinterested in the work. Marge wanted to even out Irene's performance and help her become a role model for people in her department. She felt that Irene had latent potential.

Marge began the process by asking Irene if she had any interest in entering a long-term coaching relationship. Irene was interested and excited. She was genuinely honored that Marge saw potential in her. They began the process by discussing Irene's strengths and weaknesses. They had different perspectives but found the sharing of those perspectives insightful for both of them. Marge spent more time on the floor paying attention to how Irene actually did her work. She often caught her mistakes and corrected her. After a while, Irene felt like she wasn't being coached—she was being harassed. Rather than discussing her concerns with Marge, Irene reverted to her worst possible behavior. She became more gossipy, less focused, and less interested in the work.

Marge was becoming increasingly frustrated with Irene's

work and with her attitude. Instead of having a direct conversation with Irene about the emerging trends, Marge decided to just stop coaching Irene and find another employee to invest in. Her rationale was that Irene was just too immature to understand what a great opportunity this coaching was, so she should not waste her time on Irene.

Marge failed Irene, and she also failed herself. She gave up before she had the opportunity to see how coaching interventions can pay off. Whether she realized it or not, her false start with Irene actually reduced morale in the department. The buzz was that if you were less than perfect you could never participate in the company's coaching program. Employees also whispered about the fact that Marge was imperfect herself and quite unrealistic in her expectations of them.

Marge failed to remember that all behavior takes time to change. Had she wanted to see Irene's work improve in sustainable ways, she should have spent more time coaching to the positive. That simply entails catching employees doing things right and complimenting them on it. This enables people to play to their strengths. This does not mean ignoring mistakes—only that mistakes not be the constant focus of our observations and conversations. Marge also forgot that coaching is process-oriented work that requires time, dedication, and discipline from both the coach and the person being coached.

Catastrophe #2: Wrong Coach, Wrong Approach

Ghandi is quoted as having said, "Be the change that you want to create in the world." While the next manager had certainly heard that, she failed to see its application to her work.

Gloria was the head of training and development for a large, multi-site organization. The CEO began putting a lot of emphasis on two things: developing innovations and developing innovators. He encouraged people to test new approaches, share their insights, and propose new product lines for the business. Further, the entire executive team charged managers with finding new or better ways to deliver on the service promises inherent in the company's mission and vision. They specifically asked Gloria to consider different ways to offer learning. Because she was reluctant to move away from traditional, didactic education, the CEO suggested that she get a coach to help her move in alignment with the strategic direction of the organization.

Gloria began working with an external executive coach. They

agreed in their initial contract that the objective was to help her and her department become aligned with the larger vision of the organization. They also agreed that their work together would involve a variety of tools. Gloria would be asked to read articles, participate in webinars, and develop specific tools for her staff to use. Gloria knew that the coach was a gift from her boss; he could have asked for her resignation and found someone who shared his vision for innovation. Instead, he offered her the opportunity to build the competencies required to move in synch with the rest of the company. And he offered her additional assistance for making the transition.

At each juncture with the coach, Gloria had an excuse for not completing her assignments. She was too busy to read the articles because she had a family and simply did not have time. When she did read the articles, it was ten minutes before her meeting with the coach, so she had not had time to consider the principles and their applications in her work setting. Gloria was adamantly opposed to webinars and other forms of e-learning. Rather than participating in the scheduled telecasts, she always found other, more pressing things to do. She was subtly sabotaging herself and, by extension, her department.

Interestingly enough, Gloria was excellent at regurgitating the company line about innovation to her staff and telling them that they had to transition to being more creative in their design and delivery of training services. Many of her staff snickered behind her back because they knew that she lacked the competence to lead significant advancement in the field of training and development. They knew she lacked both the education and the expertise to move the organization forward.

Gloria's coach decided that she would put it all on the line and be very direct with her about her unwillingness to give more than lip service to the organizational change. It was in that conversation that the coach learned where she had missed the mark with Gloria. As they discussed what Gloria was not

doing, Gloria finally admitted that she felt like she was back in school (she had hated school) and that the coach's emphasis on reading and learning was not appealing to her. She said that she would have preferred more discussion with the coach and less formal learning. Gloria said that she was hoping the coach could help her get beyond her fears and reservations about the direction in which the organization was moving. She revealed some deeply rooted insecurities and personal conflicts related to the changing direction of the company.

They used this occasion to redirect their work together. Eventually, the coach admitted that she did not have the competencies Gloria needed to help her get to the entrenched issues impeding her from reaching the goals established by the CEO. She conceded that her approach did not match Gloria's needs and that Gloria needed a coach with a background in psychology. By the time they came to this realization, five months had passed, Gloria was discouraged, and the coach felt like she had failed her client.

This example is an excellent cautionary tale about the importance of having direct, honest conversations throughout the coaching process. It is tempting to think that if you just push your favorite coaching approach, it will all work out well in the end. In fact, coaching approaches need to be tailored to the needs of the person being coached. (This applies whether you are a manager coaching staff or an external consultant seeking to assist a client.) Some of those needs are complex and may warrant intervention from a psychologist. It is far better to admit when you are in over your head than it is to keep drowning. Maintain open lines of communication, and be willing to recalibrate throughout the coaching process.

Catastrophe #3: It's Not the Group

Two of the nurses on the three-to-eleven shift were making the same errors with documentation. These same nurses were



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In the Spotlight

also problematic in terms of their attendance record and punctuality. They were the exceptions, not the norm for the shift and for the nursing department. Audrey was the shift supervisor. She had been hearing a lot of grumbling from the other nurses about these two and their lack of attention to detail, shoddy documentation, and tardiness. Audrey had also been getting complaints from families and patients about these same two nurses.

Since the hospital had been putting so much emphasis on coaching and growing staff, Audrey decided she would coach the three to eleven shift. She decided to structure her coaching it as in-service education. Her objectives were to get the two problem nurses to improve their documentation, punctuality and attitudes. She also wanted to stop people from complaining about the two of them.

Audrey structured the in-service to cover the correct way to document. She also decided to review the importance of being on time for each shift. When the in-service started, Audrey noticed the nonverbal messages she was getting from the group. There was a lot of eye-rolling, crossed arms, and loud sighs. Even some of the really good employees acted like they were bored.

Two weeks after the in-service, Audrey was again annoyed with the same two nurses. Their documentation was still below standard, they were still late more often than they were on time, and they were still surly. Audrey talked to her boss about the persistent problem. She was shocked when her boss

said that her coaching was not really coaching and that it had only served to annoy the people who were performing.

In fact, Audrey's boss was absolutely right. Group coaching should only be used when the majority shares a problem. Audrey was hiding behind the term coaching because she was conflict avoidant. For whatever reason, she was reluctant to confront the real problems with the people who were causing them. While she may have thought her attempt at coaching would correct the problem, it was not the right intervention. She should have conducted one-on-one coaching sessions with the two nurses who were causing the problem. Pulling the entire shift in when the trouble was with two people vexed the rest of the staff, because it was no secret who was causing the problems. Some of the employees felt that Audrey was afraid to address the real issues. This diminished her credibility as a leader.

Summary

The three examples provided herein are not uncommon. Unfortunately, many would-be coaches give the process a bad name. Whether by quitting too soon, using the wrong approach, or hiding behind coaching to avoid straight talk about performance. In each case, the coach created the catastrophe.

Work to strengthen your coaching competencies by giving direct, supportive feedback to employees. That feedback needs to be timely. It also needs to be specific. You can also strengthen your abilities by paying close attention to how you communicate with employees. Are you providing sufficient information? Are you asking questions so that you can develop more in-depth knowledge yourself? Probative skills are critical to skillful coaching.

Each of the coaches highlighted herein would have benefited from reality testing with a trusted peer. Before embarking on the coaching journey, try the approach out on someone who is more experienced and willing to give constructive feedback. It is wiser to get insights and modify the approach on the front end. This prevents making a mess that impacts your reputation and outcomes for others. The best coaches are regularly coached themselves. They are open to suggestions and willing try multiple approaches to spark peak performance. They also understand the fact that one size never fits all.

A great deal of humility is required to coach successfully. There must be a willingness to admit mistakes and move forward with revised strategies that best meet the needs of the person being coached. There is a need to move the ego aside and invest from the heart for the good of the enterprise. This enables a coach to catch people doing things right, compliment more than criticize, and constantly work on their own development. A sincere investment of this nature enables the coach to connect with people in ways that ensure improved outcomes. ■

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