



# Coaching Competence

## The areas that enable mastery of the craft

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Coaching is among the most popular business buzzwords. Leaders who do not have coaches tout their own coaching ability. Leaders who do have coaches quote from their coach's "Bible of Business Best Practices." It has become chic for large corporations to employ the services of executive coaches to maximize the performance of their most senior talent. In some



companies, middle managers are also the recipients of this largesse. And for those whose employers are not so generous, many of their leaders are shelling out big bucks from their own pockets to hire coaches who will give them the tools to transform their careers.

Coaching has become quite a popular, profitable industry. The number of self-proclaimed coaches rose from 2,000 in 1996 to 10,000 in 2002 ("The Very Real Dangers of Executive Coaching," by Steven Berglas, Harvard Business Review, June 2002, pp. 86-92). Employers are willing to pay as much as \$15,000 a day for the services of an executive coach. There are no universally accepted guidelines or competency tests for coaches, whether they earn \$500 a day or \$15,000. Without a litmus test for competence, how does one determine whether a person is capable of skillful coaching, either as an external resource or an internal practitioner?

There are key areas of mastery that are non-negotiable for anyone desiring to call himself (or herself) a coach. And these areas are as important for managers intent on coaching within their organizations as they are for anyone considering hanging out a shingle. Before exploring those areas, it is important to discuss the dangers of poorly executed coaching.

### Incompetent Coaching

First and foremost, while the desire to apply quick fixes to systemic organizational problems is very tempting, it is not even a remote possibility. When a coach positions himself as the person who has the answers to age-old performance questions without conducting thorough organizational analyses, he is

preying on the penchant for quick fixes. Wise, experienced practitioners understand that successful coaching is preceded by an analysis of the individual being coached and the organizational context in which he functions.

Second, a coach is not to be confused with a therapist or other trained mental health professional. While some in the coaching world are fortunate enough to also

have credentials in psychology, most do not. Those of us who possess layman's knowledge of matters of the mind should be very careful when coaching people on personality issues. These issues manifest themselves in many ways in the workplace, some positively and some negatively. This is not the realm in which a coach should delve, unless the coach is a licensed mental health professional.

The third danger is focusing on problems, processes and products before people. The ultimate aim of most coaching relationships is to help an individual maximize his potential. That can only happen when the individual is the priority. Many misguided coaches enter the relationship with an almost singular focus on fixing the problem, or at least providing the guidance required to fix the problem. It is impossible to sufficiently impact the problem, process or product without first dealing with the human element. Sustainable results come not from attacking a problem head-on, but from building rapport with the person and partnering on a developmental plan. It is that developmental work that will ultimately create sustainable results.

### The Coaching Competencies

There are three competencies that are required of all skillful coaches. It is the combination of these areas that enables a coach to develop mastery of the craft.

**The first competency is subject matter expertise.** If a coach is to be deemed credible, he must be viewed as a master of his field. He has to be regarded as bright, intelligent and successful. He must be viewed as competent in the fundamentals

of his field. He must have demonstrable knowledge of his own work. He must also have in-depth knowledge of the organization and the industry.

It is not necessary for the coach to be a master of the same field as the person he is coaching, but he must have sufficient knowledge to converse intelligently. A good coach will constantly familiarize himself with the business of his partner. This not only builds credibility, but it also makes the coaching process flow more easily, as the coach is not spending a lot of time trying to catch up on the terminology or nuances of the partner's field. Building familiarity is among the many ways that the coach stays focused on the partner, as well as the potential problems impacting the partner's performance.

Subject matter expertise extends to the political dynamics of the organization as well. A coach is charged with understanding, appreciating and being able to navigate the political terrain. Much of what people being coached struggle with is not the widgets, nuts and bolts, but instead, the subtle mechanics that set organizational priorities, determine resource allocation and define alliances. While a coach need not be a major player in the political gamesmanship, he must certainly understand these subterranean dynamics and their impact on the way that the enterprise functions.

**Next is strategic competence.** A coach must have an eye on where the company is headed. He must understand strategic intent, strategic planning and the strategic direction currently pursued. The first question for the coach is: Do you understand the big picture and can you translate strategy into daily action? The second question is: Assuming that the answer to the first question is in the affirmative, can you teach your partner the same? This is imperative because coaching should help a person, the partner, be well-prepared not just for today, but for tomorrow and beyond. That necessitates an appreciation of long-term organizational objectives. This is especially important when coaching a senior manager or a middle manager who has his eyes on the next level. It is essential that these ambitious people have complete comprehension of business drivers, performance indicators and other metrics that matter.

Strategic competence is also important on the micro level. It is equally important to analyze the direction and intent of business units as it is of the entire company. A wise coach will be able to help his partner get a clear understanding of the vision and supporting strategy in his own business unit. This understanding will enable the partner to be well-prepared to assume

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greater leadership roles.

**The final critical coaching competence is collaborative competence,** which refers to the coach's ability to facilitate teamwork and cooperation. The coaching relationship is a developmental partnership. As such, the coach must be able to build a positive, supportive connection with partners. Less skilled coaches operate under the mistaken assumption

that their role is almost authoritarian. They believe that they have sufficient wisdom to instruct their partners on what to do and how best to do it. In fact, a wise coach understands that his wisdom is but a small piece of the coaching puzzle. Far more is gained when the coach can tap into and release the wisdom of his partner.

Not only is the coach investing in individual performance, the coach is also investing in peak performance for the entire workgroup. By connecting with each team member on a meaningful level, the coach is able to help the entire team create an environment of excellence. Building collaborative competence also helps to position the group for peer coaching. The responsibility for generating feedback is eventually shared by all members of the team. This transition occurs because people are witness to a sound model for collaboration from their leader. They are watching someone model the communication skills, mutual respect and support required to sustain cooperation.

## Conclusion

Masterful coaching can be achieved by developing the three competencies detailed herein. Developing these competencies will not only enable would-be coaches to build credibility, but they will also enhance their confidence. Avoid the pitfalls of incompetent coaching by committing to ongoing professional development in this area. Be careful to avoid quick fixes and be very clear on your role, which is not that of a therapist or analyst. Coaching has the potential to be a powerful performance enhancement tool when executed by caring, competent individuals committed to making a substantial investment in individuals and organizations. ■

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