Employee Coaching Techniques

Manager Coaching is providing one-on-one feedback and insights aimed at guiding and inspiring continuous improvements in employees’ work performance. This involves creating a process and climate of communication, mutual respect, ongoing observation, feedback, trust, development and focus on performance objectives. Ideally, employee coaching occurs as part of the organization’s ongoing performance management system which may include appraisals, formal and informal feedback, goal setting and development opportunities. The coaching relationship is a working partnership between the supervisor and employee that is focused on the performance and development of the employee. Coaching is not a one-time, one-way interaction, but rather an ongoing collaborative process. An effective supervisor-subordinate relationship must be in place before effective coaching can occur.

Creating Employee Relationships
Creating a relationship with employees where you are able to effectively lead and coach them to be successful in their role is key to your coaching success. Knowing your employees and having a relationship where they trust and appreciate your feedback is critical in coaching. Otherwise, you spend time fighting their resistance or come across as critical or micro-managing. People resist change and coaching input when they don’t see the need, don’t want to do it or believe that the change is not possible for them. Knowing your employee’s strengths, weaknesses and motivations helps both in your relationship and in how you approach them with projects or coaching. The following key elements must be in place for a positive coaching relationship:

1) Demonstrate genuine care for and interest in employees and an orientation toward help, improvement and continuous learning. They want to know how much you care before they care how much you know.
2) Use positive interpersonal skills like listening, asking questions and involvement. Watch your voice tone, body language and words used keeping interactions positive.
3) Develop a trusting relationship. Demonstrate strong integrity, consistency and be an example of what you expect from employees. Keep confidences and never talk behind someone’s back or speak negatively about others.
4) Develop mutual respect, empathy, authenticity and genuineness.
5) Be an effective communicator, speaking with, not just to employees. Listen, share information from senior management, and always keep them informed on things that impact them. Be available for employees.
6) Tailor your relationship to the particular needs of each employee.
7) Facilitate development and learning for employees.

Defining Expectations and KPIs
To be an effective coach, you and employees must be crystal clear about what your team is about, what you deliver and expect. Start with your work team defining their purpose, and how your team achieves its purpose or results. Define your team’s top 3 Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that measure the accomplishment of your department’s purpose or output. KPIs should be Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Results-oriented, & Time-bound (SMART).

Go through the same process for each position under your direction, defining the job’s purpose, primary tasks, and key performance indicators. It is useful to pull this information into a job description tool. Involve employees in this process to ensure accurate indicators and to get their buy-in and motivation.

Identify Coaching Opportunities
Coaching requires systems in place to help you identify opportunities when coaching is needed. The opportunity may be identified by your performance tracking system, by the employee, a customer, a situation or surface from an assessment tool uncovering a need for a person’s development.

Your performance system and KPIs may show numbers and results that indicate when to approach employees with coaching and feedback. Anytime you are surprised with either excellent or subpar performance, this is an opportunity to approach the employee.

Approaching with Feedback
Maintaining regular positive relations with employees and ongoing one-on-one discussions helps when giving feedback. If you only talk with them when there are problems, people will panic when you ask to speak with
them. As a general rule, give positive feedback 5 times more than you give constructive feedback.

When giving feedback, be direct, specific and non-punishing in how you talk with employees. Come across that you care and are striving to help them, not that you are mad, attacking or taking corrective action. The words you use, how you say it and your body language all communicates meaning to the employee. Use a calm voice tone, neutral body language and words that are specific about what you see or want. Focus on the behavior and actions without attacking the person. Avoid personal attacks or speaking in general terms. For example, if someone was late three times during the past two weeks and you want to discuss it, don’t say “You are always late!” This will cause them to be defensive sending the wrong coaching message. Instead, be specific saying something like “During the last two weeks I noticed you arrived late on three occasions. What’s going on?” Once you confront with feedback, listen and ask questions to obtain the employee’s perception and side of the story. Draw out the root cause of a problem and possible ways to eliminate it. Avoid the tendency to dictate exact steps and actions. It is better to ask questions that draw out the ideas and actions from employees, inserting your comments as needed.

Through your discussion with the employee, develop a clear picture of what the situation will look like when the gap is filled or the problems solved. What results, action, goal or behavior do you want? Clearly define the problem, root cause and what is needed to fix it. Skipping this step can result in confusion, misunderstanding and frustration for all involved. Have a vision or end goal in mind, helping everyone keep sight of the reasons for the needed changes. People with a clear vision of what the end result of coaching is tend to move in that direction more quickly. The goal must be owned by both the coach and the employee in order for the employee to be motivated. Buy-in and self-motivation are essential to bring about needed changes.

Finish up each coaching discussion with clear action plans as to who will do what, by when. Then make sure to hold each other accountable for the actions, following up at key due dates and review times. Keep good notes of your coaching discussions to help with further actions, and to have needed documentation in case corrective action or discharge becomes necessary.

Provide Resources
For employees to improve in a desired outcome, they need time, support and resources. This includes time and personal commitment by the company, you (the coach) and the employee to succeed. It may also include investment in equipment, training and management support.

Practice & Skill Development
Learning a new task or skill requires practice and time to apply it to their work. For knowledge to evolve into a skill, employees need to practice it and perfect the skill with help from their coach/supervisor. Practice allows the coach to identify strengths and opportunities for improvement. Coaches need skills themselves in encouraging others to succeed, finding the right balance between how close to monitor and when to let go. They also need to be skilled in holding employees accountable for progress.

Reinforcement
One of the biggest fallacies managers hold is the assumption that if people know something, they will do it. People do what they have always done, not the new thing they learned. Managers need to be skilled in giving feedback, following up, handling nonperformance issues and resolving mistakes when people get off track. Become skilled in recognizing and rewarding when the new skill or desired behavior is present. Celebrate progress and small wins to encourage further growth and advancement. What gets rewarded gets repeated. What gets repeated becomes a habit. Use praise, recognition, and positive feedback to encourage and reward progress.

In summary, effective coaches maintain positive relationships with employees; keep open, ongoing communications as part of their daily performance process; are clear about what they expect; and are skilled in confronting employees with feedback when needed, giving it in a fashion that encourages and inspires improvement.

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Sources:
- Employee coaching relationships; Jane Brodie Gregory and Paul Levey.

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