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Roles and Responsibilities of the Leader Coach

The Role:

The role of the Leader Coach with his or her team members is to bring out their best performance and potential as individuals and as a team. Coaching enhances current performance and accelerates development of potential. Gaining the commitment of the hearts and minds of every employee creates greater business results and a culture of growth and development. Coaching motivates team members to work to high standards and recognizes their accomplishments. Coaching is a central accountability in every leader's role – it is a hallmark of leadership excellence.

The person being coached is the focus the Leader Coach. The Leader Coach listens to understand, questions to learn, challenges to expand alternatives, motivates to stretch horizons, and disciplines to realistic goals. This is not a “telling” or directive role. In most cases, it is guiding a process of self-discovery so that the individual finds their own answers and sets their own change goals. The leader then supports the implementation of the goals by monitoring, encouraging, giving ongoing feedback on progress, and celebrating achievement. Often, the role of the Leader Coach is to be patient, to create the space for learning in the individual's own way, rather than helping or coming to solutions too soon.

The subject, or content, of the coaching can range from learning a new skill or improving an element of performance through to the development of personal leadership effectiveness by enhancing self mastery. Depending on the coaching issue, the leader coach may want to reinforce somewhat different outcomes. For example, if coaching for skills or performance, the leader will be looking for tangible signs of improvement within a specified timeframe. If coaching for development or personal effectiveness, on the other hand, the leader may be motivating stretch goals to prepare for future assignments, looking for signs that the individual is risking new behaviors and learning from them. If coaching the team, the leader may be assessing when to step in to direct the team and when to wait for them to find their own way.

The outcome of ongoing leadership coaching is continuous improvement, both in the capabilities of team members and the business results they generate. For the business, coaching results in a competitive leadership advantage. For individuals and teams, coaching may result in changes in behavior, competency, perspective, interpersonal relationships, perhaps even in job and career decisions. It will also result in a cascading of this development culture through the modeling of leaders who are both coaching and being coached by their own leaders. Through both giving and receiving coaching, leaders are not only contributing to the development of others but developing themselves as leaders as well.



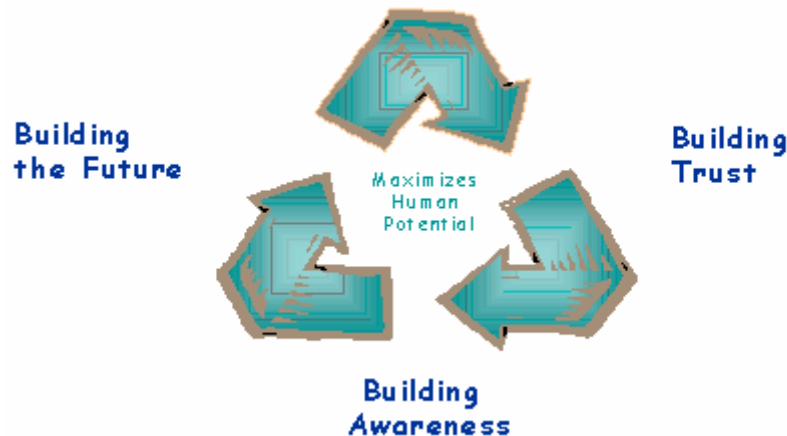
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The Process:

Coaching conversations between leader and team member happen in at least a couple of ways. One is over a number of weeks or months, longer-term coaching toward specific goals which may take time and lots of practice to achieve. Within that, there are many opportunities for short-term or spot coaching, which happens every day, in the moment, on the spot. For example, a leader is coaching an individual on improving interpersonal skills. The individual has a plan and timetable, which they discuss routinely. In a hallway conversation, the leader sees her manage a potential conflict situation successfully and gives her positive reinforcement and recognition of her accomplishment in the moment.

Let's look at the three stages in the coaching process over a longer time period, including a number of sessions, as shown below:



The first stage, **Building Trust**, involves the coach listening to and understanding the employee's issue, expressing empathy, and probing to clarify the coaching goal. It involves asking the right questions so that the individual can come to their own development of their coaching goals. It ends with summarizing to provide direction for the next stage in the process.

The steps for the leader coach are:

- Make a connection with the person being coached, establish rapport
- Clarify expectations of each other, including identifying the meeting as a coaching session
- Ask the individual for the agenda, or name the issue to be discussed
- Explore the issue to ensure mutual understanding
- Empathize with any challenges expressed and support positives
- Probe through open-ended questions to clarify perspectives, issues, players, meanings
- Be aware of your own assumptions, interpretations, judgments, hunches
- Use active listening to summarize key points and check agreements.



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The middle stage, **Building Awareness**, involves the leader coach providing feedback from a neutral perspective, either from direct observation or from other feedback sources including 360° surveys. Global or cultural issues may be part of this conversation. The purpose is to create new awareness for the individual about how they are perceived by the leader and others around them. The leader coach may need to challenge the individual on any blind spots inhibiting achievement of the coaching goal. This stage ends with a clear focus for development and the beginnings of a realistic plan.

The steps for the leader coach are:

- Provide first-person (“I see...I feel...”) feedback respectfully, from direct experience and observations, or from other feedback sources
- Be clear and descriptive, not judgmental
- Check hunches and validate assumptions with the individual
- Allow silences for the individual to absorb new information and perspective
- Expect some resistance – and don’t fight it!
- Assist the individual in reframing their thinking and experience in light of new data
- Support the individual’s learning process, encourage reflection
- Continue to question for clarity and listen for acceptance
- Use active listening to summarize mutually agreed development areas.

The final stage, Building the Future, involves the coach assisting the employee with developing and implementing a detailed plan to close the gap between current and desired outcomes, seeing possibilities and making choices, and persisting through the challenge, and sometimes discomfort of learning new behaviors. It is often as part of this third stage that the leader discusses with the individual how they fit into succession plans, recognizing the individual’s talent and setting realistic expectations about the future.

The steps for the leader coach are:

- Request a detailed “what by when” development plan from the individual – one or two areas of concentration are usually enough at one time
- Provide feedback on the plan to ensure its relevance, timeliness, actions, stretch
- Provide support for actions through sponsorship, funding, networking, expertise
- Monitor progress regularly through updates and modify the plan as necessary
- Reinforce accomplishments, give ongoing feedback to build positive momentum
- Recognize achievements, celebrate successes, and seek new coaching goals.

These stages are as relevant to a single coaching conversation – the conversation starts with trust building, moves into the “meat” of the issue, and ends with a follow up plan – as they are to the coaching process as a whole over a number of sessions or a number of months as described above.



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Spot coaching, or short-term coaching, uses these same stages although in a lot less detail! For example, in the situation described above, the leader might say something like:

“Hi Mike, I have some positive feedback for you, have you got a minute? (Building Trust) I really admired the way you interacted with Susan today. You were not defensive in reaction to her criticism and suggested following up with his managers to get more information on the issues. (Building Awareness) I’d like you to reflect on what you did differently this time and how it felt to you – we can discuss it at our meeting next week.” (Building the Future)

These stages can apply at the team as well as the individual level. Although it is important to follow the stages as an overall process framework, the coach should expect that it may be necessary to cycle back to include new information or build trust at a different level, either in a single conversation or in a longer-term coaching process. It is also to be expected that over time and with new goals, the longer-term cycle can be repeated as the leader coach works with team members on an ongoing basis.

Internal or external coaches other than the leader coach may use somewhat different approaches but the process will be similar. Leader coaches are ultimately responsible for the outcomes, even when they enlist the help of someone else to do additional coaching. It is critical to successful results that at the least, the leader stays close to the coaching process, has periodic input, and supports positive change. For example, the leader in selecting an external coach will want to direct the focus of the coaching at the outset to be sure it is relevant to business goals and will want to see visible signs of outcomes being achieved over time.

Notes on Resistance

Resistance is a natural, almost inevitable part of coaching. If we as individuals didn’t resist change, we wouldn’t need a coach – we’d simply do it ourselves. But we do resist change, by our natures – our own defense mechanisms, our blind spots, hold us back from changing. We often need someone to support, prod and encourage us to do what we need to do.

A coach recognizes resistance when the person being coached repeatedly gets into “Yes, but...” loops when discussing suggestions about change or hearing feedback about behavior. Resistance can also take the form of moving the responsibility for action onto the leader coach, rather than making a personal commitment to the change. It can show up in body language, high levels of emotion, missed appointments, and so on. It is the coach’s responsibility to work through the resistance, to get to the bottom of things, in order to keep the process moving forward.



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The worst thing a coach can do is to push the individual further into the resistance. Rather, the best approach is to work with it, explore it, bring it to the surface, allow the individual to become aware of it and appreciate the power it has over alternative possibilities. In some situations, the individual will not be motivated to change and the leader coach will, after a period of time, need to be more directive with performance requirements and timetables for the person to remain in his or her role. In a few cases where even these requirements are not met, the leader coach will need to begin a more formal performance management process with the help of Human Resources. Again, it is not the role of the coach to try to “sell” the alternatives to a resistant individual but, if all else fails, simply to state the requirements and the consequences clearly. However, in most cases, individuals, with help, will come to their own realizations and change as needed. It is important to note that resistance creates high energy, energy that can be used for positive outcomes once it is understood and accepted. Rick Maurer’s book called “Beyond the Wall of Resistance”, has many helpful strategies for dealing with resistance.

A Last Word

Remember, the success, or lack of it, in coaching has a lot to do with you as the coach – how you listen, empathize, challenge, support, persist with the learning of the person being coached. Being appreciative of the individual and open-minded about the situation as you begin can make all the difference in the tone, and hence, the outcome of the coaching conversation.