Coaching for Human Performance

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Is there anything new about coaching? What about a four-step approach that targets common key issues at each stage? Read on.

YOU JUST GOT A CALL from the vice president of human resources asking you to work with a senior manager who has been experiencing performance problems. The manager progressed up the ladder after many years on a career track as a technical specialist. He's from the "old school," and typically uses a command-and-control approach to leadership and employee motivation.

But that style is out-of-step with the new trends in your organization, which emphasize customer service, collaborative teamwork, and participative approaches to problem solving and decision making. You've been asked to design and implement an individualized coaching process to help the manager understand how he is being perceived, and what impact his leadership and communication styles have on others. It is hoped that the new coaching process will result in an executive development plan that targets the critical competencies required for success in the organization.

You wonder what to do first. You'd like to respond to the request and assist in a way that will benefit the manager, the people reporting to him, and others affected by his management style. It could be a win-win situation, if you can structure and deliver an appropriate intervention, and if the manager can rise to the challenge and implement the plan successfully.

Four steps

First, you have to consider how to structure the coaching intervention. When properly designed, individualized coaching can help all levels of managers identify and address their strengths and areas that need development.

Increasingly, organizations are using individualized coaching in programs for executive and management development, succession planning, and career counseling. Whatever the context, it presents specific challenges and issues that must be addressed. A structured, systematic approach lends focus and maximizes the chances of success. But it's essential that the coaching be flexible enough to address specific individual and organizational needs that may emerge.

A four-step approach, COACH, can provide a structured approach to management development. Each step is designed to address key issues. The steps are:
1. **C**ontract.
2. **O**bserve and **A**ssess.
3. **C**onstructively challenge.
4. **H**andle resistance.

AN ASSESSMENT PLAN TO IDENTIFY MANAGEMENT COMPETENCIES

	Personality Inventory	In-Basket Simulation	Behavioral Exercises	360 Feedback
Communication Skills				
Oral communication	X		X	X
High-impact presentation			X	X
Listening			X	X
Task-Management Skills				
Planning and organizing	X	X		X
Delegating		X		X
Administrative control		X		X
Performance management			X	X
Interpersonal Skills				
Leadership and influence	X	X	X	X
Diversity and sensitivity	X	X	X	X
Team skills	X		X	X
Negotiation and conflict management	X		X	X
Problem-Analysis Skills				
Strategic-problem analysis	X	X	X	X
Decisiveness	X	X	X	X
Judgment	X	X	X	X
Self-Management Skills				
Career orientation	X			
Stress tolerance	X			
Initiative	X	X	X	
Self-insight	X			X

To start, the training consultant, the person receiving coaching, and other relevant parties make a contract or set of agreements so that each knows the objectives, who is responsible for doing what, and how success will be evaluated.

Next, the consultant observes and assesses the coaching recipient to identify his or her strengths and areas for improvement, which will form the basis of an action plan.

Then, the consultant challenges the person being coached in a way that is supportive and compelling so that he or she understands the issues and is prepared to address them.

Last, the consultant will have to handle the resistance the coached person may exhibit when confronted with discrepancies between his or her self-evaluation and feedback from others and when asked to make changes in his or her behavior.

Step 1: Contract

The key to a successful coaching intervention starts with step 1 of the COACH process: contracting. A coaching contract is similar to a legal contract; it's a set of clear, workable agreements. A carefully constructed contract can help clarify the coaching goals, approaches, and outcomes. Many coaching interventions fail because of poor or insufficient contracting. A clear contract lets all parties know what they're getting into and helps lessen any anxiety, resistance, and anger.

To begin the contracting process, the training consultant has to identify the client (that isn't as obvious as it may seem), the other relevant parties (such as, the client's manager), and everyone's needs and desires, including those of the consultant. After all, he or she has some ideas about the necessary conditions for a good outcome.

Next, it's the consultant's responsibility to ensure that all parties understand and agree on the main terms of the contract. When in doubt, don't assume anything. It's better to risk annoying people by stating and restating the obvious than to hope that they're all in agreement.

In this step, the consultant's job is to help all parties identify the relevant, foreseeable issues and to make sure they discuss and agree on them. Throughout, it may be necessary to work to maintain the contract. Regardless of its clarity, people can remember points differently or try to change them.

A fuzzy contract—one in which people make vague agreements because they don't want to face difficult issues—can spell trouble. If the consultant thinks the contract isn't workable, it's better to turn down the assignment than to hope the situation will change.

Sometimes, political considerations weigh against negotiating forcefully. In such cases, it may be best to recommend an external consultant.

The contract should clarify these areas:
▶ the client. Is it the person to receive coaching? His or her manager? The HRD department? Other key executives?
▶ the definition, parameters, or scope of the project
▶ the purposes and intended outcomes of the coaching intervention, stated and unstated
▶ the involvement, if any, of others within the client's system, such as his or her manager
▶ who "owns" the intervention and who is accountable for what activities or outcomes
▶ how the need for the coaching intervention will be communicated to the client
▶ who will receive feedback
▶ how the feedback will be delivered and in what form
▶ how the coaching intervention will be monitored and evaluated
▶ what follow-up to use, such as 360 feedback
▶ how the results will be translated into an individualized development plan
▶ how the data, results, and findings will be used, such as integrating them into succession planning.

Step 2: Observe and Assess

Once the issues of the contracting step are clarified, the COACH process turns to design and implementation. The goal is to observe the coaching recipient and assess his or her strengths and areas needing development. The training consultant should design a comprehensive approach for observing and assessing the targeted competencies.

In selecting the approach, it's important to tailor it to the specific needs of the client and the organization. It's best to use multiple assessment approaches.

The matrix describes typical management competencies and several assessment approaches.

The competency areas most commonly evaluated include:

▶ communication (listening, meeting management, presentations)
▶ interpersonal (negotiation, conflict management)
▶ task management (delegation, team development, performance management)
▶ problem solving and decision making (strategic and long-range planning, judgment)
▶ self-management (stress management, career development).

A job-profile analysis can enhance the organization's strategic training plan to identify the core competencies required for future performance. The analysis can also serve as a review of the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities to perform successfully in the client's current job.

First, identify the relevant competencies and then select the tools most appropriate for measuring them. A

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wide variety of assessment instruments are available to measure critical skills and knowledge; personality and style; and interests, values, and career orientation. They include paper-and-pencil instruments, behavioral exercises, role plays, simulations, leaderless group exercises, and an integrated approach that combines those techniques. For example, one way to assess knowledge is by using situational interviews, simulations, and work-sample tests.

The training consultant should avoid the trap of using only techniques with which he or she is familiar and comfortable.

A job-profile analysis can also help the training consultant define the competencies to be targeted. Ideally, the analysis should include the

client's departmental strategic plan to identify the major competencies required for future performance and a review of the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities to perform successfully in the client's current job.

A multirater instrument can provide feedback on the client's personality and style (such as, leadership, communication, and interpersonal skills). Many off-the-shelf instruments can provide insight on a person's personality and style. Diverse style measures are often ·used for team building. Such popular organizational marriage-counseling-type tools can help managers become more aware of how others view their leadership and interpersonal styles and how their styles affect staff, team members, and customers.

Newer-generation, five-factor personality inventories can provide a comprehensive overview of the client and how he or she approaches personal and organizational challenges.

It can be useful to gather information about the client's interests, values, and career orientation by using a structured interview process or career assessment instrument.

Sometimes in management coaching interventions, it's necessary to refer to outside resources (such as, therapists, alcohol- and substance-recovery programs, and family counselors) to help a client with personal or lifestyle issues that are interfering with his or her job performance. It may also be necessary to conduct a computerized health-risk appraisal or medical checkup.

When selecting the assessment approaches, it's important to consider these issues:
▶ the critical competencies that will be targeted
▶ the assessment approaches and tools that will be used to measure the key competencies
▶ who will provide data on the relevant competencies (peers, staff, customers, the client's manager, and so forth)
▶ the context in which data is collected so that it yields the most accurate results
▶ who will provide the feedback and how it will be delivered
▶ to what extent confidentiality will be

maintained throughout the feedback process and how that can be assured

▶ how results will be assembled and summarized to provide maximum clarity about the client's strengths and areas needing development.

Step 3: Constructively challenge

The third step in the COACH process involves challenging the client in a constructive, not critical, way with the information collected in the observing and assessing step. The information should be summarized and delivered to the client in a way that helps him or her understand and accept it without becoming defensive. Otherwise, the best contracting efforts and measurement approaches aren't likely to help the client improve the targeted performance behaviors.

In this step, the consultant should deliver the information using oral and written feedback. If using separate computerized feedback reports, it's advisable to prepare a final summary report that focuses on development. The consultant should maintain confidentiality, and provide nonevaluative observations and comments about the targeted competencies. It's important not to assign labels or make predictions about the client's future success based on the assessment results.

One important issue is whether the client is realistic about his or her strengths and areas that need development. Some managers have unrealistic views of their skill levels. They either overestimate or underestimate.

Overestimators tend to rate themselves higher than others rate them, so they become defensive about the feedback. The consultant should listen, focus the feedback on specific behavior, and avoid describing personality traits or attitudes. The idea is to share information using specific examples. That helps the client get a handle on what he or she may be doing that caused the negative feedback.

Underestimators may lack confidence. Often, underestimators fear failure, so they tend to be perfectionists and self-critical. The consultant should give them a lot of examples of their successes to help them have a more accurate, positive self-image.

A CASE STUDY

Louise is a manager in a department with more than 100 people. Though she is competent technically, many of her staff find her difficult to deal with on a personal level. When her boss approached her about her management style, Louise contacted the HR department to see whether it could give her some coaching assistance. Sally was assigned to work with her.

Contract Sally met with Louise to become acquainted and discover her coaching needs. She gave Louise some options to think about and got her OK to talk with Louise's boss about his views. Sally and Louise agreed to meet later to decide how to proceed. At that meeting, Louise said she wanted to use 360 feedback to learn how people in her department view her as a manager. She agreed that she'd share the results with her boss and that she'd work with Sally to address issues that arose in the feedback.

Observe and Assess Next, Sally used a 360 instrument and conducted semi-structured interviews with Louise's staff. Sally found that they had respect for Louise's technical skills, extensive experience, and analytical abilities. But they resented her arbitrary decision-making style, abrasive and critical manner, and unwillingness to delegate meaningful responsibilities. Many feared her and would just try to get through the day rather than use their abilities and contribute fully.

Constructively Challenge Sally didn't look forward to presenting the information to Louise, though she knew she had to. The meeting was uncomfortable, but Sally was able to present the feedback clearly and directly without sugarcoating it. She also tried to be gentle and supportive. To clarify some points, Sally used her own observations to help Louise understand why people perceived her the way they did.

Handle Resistance Despite Sally's care in presenting the assessment, Louise wasn't consistently receptive. At one point, Louise criticized her staff, saying that their perceptions were biased, that they were envious of her position, and that they were upset about organizational problems that had little to do with her. Louise also challenged Sally directly, saying that she was unprofessional because she took the staff's side and was "taken in" by disgruntled people with an ax to grind. Sally handled the resistance by not taking it personally and by realizing that it's a typical response to hearing negative information about oneself. Sally pointed out gently that Louise might be using those rationales to discount information that she found disturbing.

After some discussion, Louise acknowledged that possibility and decided to address her issues head-on. They agreed that she would attend a class on delegating and participative management, and have several coaching sessions with Sally to work on some of the more difficult problems.

Louise did attend class and meet with Sally for coaching. Though she didn't find it easy, Louise was able to make some significant changes in her behavior. She also said that she was proud to be able to handle some difficult management situations differently than she would have in the past. After six months, Sally did a follow-up assessment with Louise's staff. She found that some issues remained, but they reported that Louise's management style had improved considerably. People also said that her department was more productive and less tense.
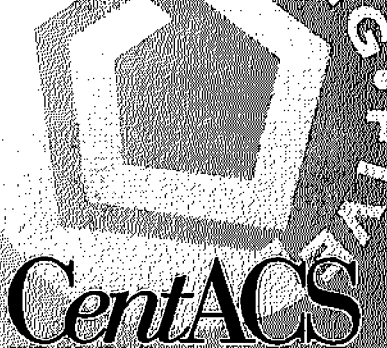
In this step, it's important to address these issues:

▶ how to present the feedback so that it facilitates the client's acceptance and understanding

▶ how to balance confrontation with support

▶ how to share feedback with the client's manager and others so that the client retains dignity and an appropriate degree of control

▶ how to best balance quantitative and qualitative data

▶ what special considerations to give in delivering feedback to people whose self-evaluation is different from the feedback

▶ how to give feedback to an overestimator

▶ how to give feedback to an underestimator

▶ how to pace the feedback so that the client can assimilate all of the issues and still focus on the most important ones.

Step 4: Handle resistance

In almost all management coaching processes, the client will exhibit some resistance to the process itself or to the feedback. The training consultant should be prepared to deal with the client's anger, frustration, and direct or indirect challenges.

Typically, people that lack insight about the areas in which they need improvement resist the most. The consultant must work hard to understand the client's feelings, especially the fears and anxieties he or she may not feel comfortable acknowledging. That requires a high degree of support, active listening, and probing to uncover the source of the resistance. It's important to recognize that when people are resistant, they're unlikely to accept feedback as valid or commit to changing their behavior.

Handling resistance can be especially challenging. It's natural for the consultant to feel that after his or her hard work in the earlier steps, the client should appreciate that and go along with the recommendations. The consultant may miss subtle signs of resistance. With experience, however, it's possible to learn not to take resistance personally. If a consultant is comfortable with a client expressing resistance, it's easier to help him or her identify and deal with his or her feelings. That paves the way for the client to do the hard work of behavioral change.

The critical issues in this step are

▶ how to spot resistance, whether overt or subtle

▶ how to handle the client's defensiveness, denial, and anger

▶ how to handle the client's anxiety and low self-esteem

▶ how to translate the coaching into a specific action plan that addresses the client's issues rather than going through the motions so that he or she appears to comply

▶ how to monitor and evaluate the client's progress with his or her development plan

▶ what process to use to follow up

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▶ what type of resistance the consultant is most vulnerable to and how to avoid getting hooked

▶ how to distinguish between resistance that is just resistance and valid criticism of the coaching or feedback.

In addition to following the steps of the COACH process, it's also important for the consultant to seek and be receptive to feedback about his or her role as coach. In fact, the essence of coaching is helping others deal with feedback. And who are we to assume that feedback applies only to others and not to ourselves? ■

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