



Coaching Employees

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Management approaches change very little over the years, but the last few years have seen a significant shift away from the traditional “command and control” approach to that of coaching. Since the industrial age, the prevailing style of management has been directive. While it softened from that of a drill sergeant to that of an orchestra director, it has been largely based on telling employees what to do.

The problem with a directing style of management is that it overlooks the unique issues and opportunities that lie within every employee. When management focus is on directing and controlling, there is little time available for individual employee development.

I remember when I first discovered this in my own management career. I asked one of my employees one day what percent of his talents and capability he was putting into his job. His answer was twenty-five percent. I then asked him what else he could offer and for the first time I was in listening versus telling mode. I went on to learn about his other skills and knowledge that until that time I had overlooked.

I later learned to also ask my employees what percent of the skills and knowledge needed did they actually possess. This question required a little more probing, empathizing and listening, but I consistently received an answer that also ran below ideal levels.

In your organization, how much do you know about your employee’s developmental needs and their opportunities to contribute more? How much time do you spend helping them develop and employ their talents on the job? If your answer is not enough, then consider adopting a coaching style of management.

Unlike when coaching athletes, the term coaching in business defines a style of management that focuses on employee development through non-coercive means. It is an approach based on honest and open communication which employs listening and questioning skills. Here are the four key steps to effective employee coaching:

First, establish a trusting relationship between you and your employee. Without a relationship and environment that makes the employee feel safe in being transparent with their thoughts and feelings, coaching can’t take place. Let your employee know they are valued and respected. Be transparent with some of your own shortcomings and create an atmosphere of open communication.

Second, look for coachable moments. When employees come to you with questions, don’t be too quick to give them the answer. Ask them for their opinions. Brainstorm with them on alternatives for handling the situation. Ask them about the pros and cons of each. Discuss with them the key criteria used to evaluate each. Help them with the analysis. Not only does this result in their development, but it gives them a stronger sense of ownership for the results.

Also find coachable moments in failure and under-performance. If a project goes over budget, a sale is lost or workmanship is below acceptable levels, ask them what happened. Ask them where things went wrong. Ask them for ideas on what could be done better, faster or cheaper in the future.

Third, give your employees special assignments. Give them developmental projects in an environment where it is safe to fail. Help them develop measurements to track progress and gain better self-awareness. Debrief with them on lessons learned. Help them not only understand where they did well or under-performed, but also how to apply what they learned.

Lastly, give them support and candid feedback. Always be constructive, but challenge them. Let them know you believe in them, yet believe they can do better. When they do better, tell them. Give them praise and recognition. Let them know you are their advocate.

Management time and money spent on employee development is more than offset by the improvement in their productivity and effectiveness. Managers that employ modern business coaching techniques are much more successful in developing and motivating their employees than those that don’t.