

LEADERSHIP, COACHING & PERFORMANCE

Coaching for Effectiveness: From Managing People to Developing Performance

Leadership becomes more powerful when it develops the capacity of others to see, think, feel, and act more effectively.

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Originally published in 1994 as Coaching for Effectiveness: A New Leadership Paradigm. This Executive Insight revisits and updates the ideas for today's leaders and organizations.

There is a moment in almost every game when the plan is no longer enough. The score has changed. The pressure is on. Something that worked earlier is no longer working. The players already know the fundamentals. They do not necessarily need more information. They need to see something they are not seeing.

That is where coaching matters. The same is true in organizations.

Leaders spend enormous amounts of time setting direction, allocating resources, defining priorities, reviewing performance, and solving problems. But at some point, leadership becomes less about providing the answer and more about developing the capacity of other people to see, think, feel, and act more effectively.

THE EXECUTIVE QUESTION

Are you simply managing today's performance - or also developing tomorrow's performer?

Management has its place. Coaching expands it.

Organizations need management. Someone has to establish priorities, coordinate resources, make decisions, define expectations, and ensure commitments are fulfilled.

The problem begins when management becomes synonymous with control - when the leader becomes the source of every answer, correction, decision, and solution. It can produce short-term compliance, but it can also create dependency.

The leader's role is not merely to direct performance. It is to help develop the person who produces the performance.

Coaching is more than a response to a problem.

In many organizations, coaching still carries a corrective undertone. A coach is brought in because someone has a behavioral issue, a performance gap, a difficult transition, or a skill that needs improvement. Sometimes that is exactly the right use of coaching.

But if coaching is only associated with fixing what is wrong, people quickly learn to interpret the invitation to work with a coach as a signal that something is wrong with them. That is a limited view.

Some of the greatest performers in sports, music, and the arts have coaches throughout their careers - not because they are failing, but because they are committed to getting better. They review performance, practice, receive feedback, refine technique, and prepare for what comes next.

THE REFRAME

Coaching is not only remediation. It is a discipline for elevating performance, expanding capacity, and accelerating development.

The same should be true for leaders.

High-performing leaders do not outgrow coaching. Often they benefit from it most because the complexity, consequences, and expectations surrounding their decisions continue to increase.

A significant part of a leader's role is also to coach and mentor the people they lead - developing capability, asking questions, offering perspective, providing feedback, and helping people grow.

But there are times when an external coach can create something that is difficult to create inside the existing relationship.

Leaders and associates have history. They form perceptions of one another and patterns of communication. Sometimes neither person can see an issue clearly because both are already part of the relationship.

An outside coach can bring independence and fresh perspective. There may be less need to protect an image, please the boss, or work around an established perception. A skilled coach can ask questions that may not otherwise be asked, notice patterns that have become invisible, and sometimes get to the heart of the matter more quickly.

The leader brings context, relationship, accountability, and ongoing development. An external coach can bring independence, fresh perspective, and a conversation less constrained by the history between leader and associate.

Knowing which role is needed is part of effective leadership.

Organizations can develop leaders to coach others. That is different from simply becoming better at giving advice.

Coaching relies heavily on inquiry, observation, feedback, and helping another person see, decide, and own what happens next. Mentoring more often draws on experience - offering perspective, guidance, context, and lessons learned. Teaching transfers knowledge. Advising brings expertise. Managing clarifies expectations and accountability.

All can be valuable. They are not the same. The most effective leaders learn to distinguish which role will best serve the person and situation - and when an outside perspective may add value that cannot easily be created from inside the relationship.

From telling to seeing.

A manager and a coach may be dealing with the same person, the same challenge, and the same desired result. What changes is the conversation.

The manager may ask: What went wrong? Why didn't you do this? Here's what I need you to do.

The coach may ask: What are you seeing? What might you be missing? What assumptions are you making? What context are you operating from? What is getting in the way? What are you willing to do next?

Coaching is not withholding expertise. There are moments to direct, teach, challenge, or make a decision. The distinction is whether the leader's involvement creates greater dependence - or greater capability.

THE DISTINCTION

If I solve today's problem for you, I may improve today's result. If I help you become better at seeing, I may affect hundreds of problems I will never be present to solve.

The field does not have to change for the player to see it differently.

One of the most important functions of a coach is to help someone see the field differently. The customer, team, challenge, or resources may be exactly the same. Yet a new distinction can make something visible that was previously invisible.

Context matters because it shapes what we notice, what meaning we make, how we feel, and the choices and actions that follow. Change the context, and the same facts can be experienced very differently.

Sometimes the breakthrough is not: "What should I do differently?" It is: "What context am I operating from - and how is it shaping what I see, feel, choose, and do?"

The best coaching eventually makes the coach less necessary.

If every decision still has to come back to the leader, development has not occurred. If people continually need someone else to supply the answer, confidence has not developed. If accountability only exists when someone is watching, ownership has not developed.

Effective coaching builds capacity. People become more able to notice, question, decide, act, recover, learn, and adjust.

THE LEADERSHIP TEST

Does your involvement leave people more dependent on you - or more capable because of you?

Training is not the same as development.

Training can provide knowledge, models, tools, and skills. Development requires application, practice, feedback, reflection, and adjustment. Serious performers do not simply learn once and move on. They keep practicing and they keep being coached.

That is why great athletes continue working with coaches throughout their careers. Performance is reviewed. Practice is deliberate. Feedback is expected. The work is never considered finished simply because the performer is already good.

Coaching is not a softer form of management.

Great coaches can be extraordinarily demanding. They expect preparation, practice, accountability, commitment, feedback, performance, and results.

What distinguishes coaching is not an absence of standards. It is the belief that people can grow in their capacity to meet those standards. A coach does not eliminate accountability. A coach strengthens ownership.

Sustainable organizational change still happens through people. New structures, systems, technology, and strategy matter, but if people continue seeing, feeling, and responding in essentially the same way, the new system often gets absorbed into the old culture.

At its best, coaching changes more than behavior. It changes the context from which a person sees, feels, chooses, and acts - and therefore what becomes possible.

The result still matters.

The opportunity is not to choose between people and performance. It is to recognize that extraordinary performance is created through people. Develop the person. Raise the standard. Strengthen ownership. Expand what people can see. Increase their capacity to act. And produce results.

That is coaching for effectiveness.