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PRESS

BUILDING A COACHING ORGANIZATION



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Over the last 20 years, we have seen unprecedented growth in the executive/manager coaching industry.

Sophisticated measurements (for example, in reports by the International Coach Federation, Carol Kauffman, Jack and Patti Phillips, and others) are proving that coaching leads to:

- significant return on investment and bottom-line improvement
- increased skills in managing complexity, pressure, and stress
- redirection of derailing behavior in leaders and managers
- more productive teams
- increased engagement and loyalty
- smoother organizational transitions.

With this research showing the positive effects of coaching in organizations, company leaders are, more and more, considering multiple coaching avenues to promote the growth of not only key individuals but also entire teams, departments, divisions, and institutions. Having coached in hundreds of organizations, we asked ourselves how we might leverage excellent individual coaching successes into higher levels of organizational success.

As we observed and experimented with our models, we realized that building a coaching organization requires a total systems approach that incorporates most of the popular learning and organization development notions of recent years—namely, but not limited to, emotional intelligence, employee engagement, strategic planning, constructive feedback, and change management. In essence, building a coaching organization requires a “perfect storm” of learning tools and techniques.

These three building blocks are essential in building a coaching organization:

1. all employees learning and practicing basic coaching tools and mindsets
2. everyone in the organization understanding and “living in” coaching language and dialogue skills

3. a systems infrastructure for hard wiring coaching into the culture and practices throughout the organization.

In this issue of *TD at Work*, you will learn:

- the definition of a coaching organization
- how organizational coaching integrates with other learning paradigms within a total systems approach
- underlying theory and support for the tools and techniques needed to build a coaching organization
- how to plan, design, market, measure, and build a coaching organization
- how to manage and navigate challenges and implement solutions.

WHAT IS A COACHING ORGANIZATION?

Before we define “a coaching organization,” let’s review some classic definitions of coaching itself (see the Coaching Definitions sidebar for examples). Most definitions involve one or more of these concepts:

- a preferred future
- occurrence of learning and development
- full use of natural strengths
- people being challenged while being supported
- higher levels of performance
- emergence of the best in people
- focused dialogue, open questions, active listening, and reflection
- self-awareness and personal responsibility.

Imagine these actions, skills, and results being not only realized between one coach and one coachee but extrapolated to everyone in an organization: everyone using dialogue and coaching conversations with one another, at all levels and between all levels, to solve problems and discuss everyday work, to address concerns and reach agreements, and to continually move

toward higher levels of understanding and performance. The idea is powerful.

So then, what is a coaching organization? Given our experience, we like to define it as follows:

A coaching organization is one where the culture and all the infrastructures within that culture facilitate and reward everyone to learn, practice, and engage in mindful coaching conversations to get work done, accomplish goals, and reach both personal and strategic growth and success.

Now that you're familiar with what a coaching organization is, we can move on to its building blocks.

BUILDING BLOCK 1: MINDSETS AND TOOLS

Having more and more people within an organization practicing coaching skills leads to more effective conversations, problem solving, strategic thinking, personal growth, mutual support, and action planning toward defined

measures. Basically, the concept of “everyone giving each other feedback in a meaningful and actionable way” becomes a norm and not something that is done stressfully during a once-a-year performance appraisal. Sharing insights to foster higher performance becomes acceptable and expected at all levels—up, down, and across. All employees have permission to ask questions to further their learning.

Why is this permission given and even expected? Because everyone has been involved in a carefully planned set of activities to transfer coaching skills, starting at the top of the organization. As we shall see, this can happen through a variety of learning structures—from workshops and online communities to role modeling and in-house YouTube videos. Such carefully planned and consistent learning experiences create the kind of trust and safety where people try out these new skills and gradually become better and more astute in what it takes to maintain a systems structure around coaching. With this knowledge and tangible results, co-workers and leaders take on these tenets of coaching:

COACHING DEFINITIONS

“Any conversation in which we support another in making progress toward a preferred future” (Jeff Matthews).

“A process that enables learning and development to occur and thus performance to improve. To be a successful coach requires a knowledge and understanding of process as well as a variety of styles, skills, and techniques that are appropriate to the context in which the coaching takes place” (Eric Parsloe).

“Coaching is unlocking people’s potential to maximize their own performance” (John Whitmore).

“An interactive process to help individuals and organizations develop more rapidly and produce more satisfying results; improve others’ ability to set goals, take action, make better decisions, and make full use of their natural strengths” (International Coach Federation).

“Challenging and supporting people in achieving higher levels of performance while allowing them to bring out the best in themselves and those around them” (Robert Hargrove).

“A Socratic-based future-focused dialogue between a facilitator (coach) and a participant (coachee/client) where the facilitator uses open questions, active listening, summarizing and reflections which are aimed at stimulating self-awareness and personal responsibility of the participant” (Jonathan Passmore and Annette Fillery-Travis).

Source: Adapted from *Organizational Coaching* (pp. 7-12) by Virginia Bianco-Mathis, Cynthia Roman, and Lisa K. Nabors. Alexandria, VA: ASTD Press, 2008.

- Believe that we are all talented and are able to perform at a higher level.
- Deliver honest feedback even when the message might be hard to hear—and do it with appropriate dialogue skills and empathy.
- Center myself so I focus on each interaction and my listeners.
- Stay in the moment.
- Hold a vision of possibility for myself and others.
- Support others in achieving visions and desired outcomes.

Think of the possibilities when everyone in a company is working and interacting while maintaining this mindset. When you add to the mix that all employees are trained in coaching dialogue (the appropriate way to inquire into another's thinking and to share one's own thinking), a culture of respect and honesty emerges. Bosses, subordinates, leaders, managers, and colleagues begin to treat one another like people, not objects.

SHARING INSIGHTS TO FURTHER HIGHER PERFORMANCE BECOMES ACCEPTABLE AND EXPECTED AT ALL LEVELS—UP, DOWN, AND ACROSS.

We all know what it feels like to be ordered around, ignored, dismissed, mandated to, or pushed around. The continued practice of coaching can shape attitudes and behaviors for the better. Role modeling from key stakeholders and peer pressure from colleagues will often push the fence sitters over. Dissenters who fear the change tend to leave. In two to three years, a culture can transform.

One thing you might be thinking is, “Okay, sounds good. But how do you make sure this culture is sustained and doesn't become a one-shot deal that dissipates over time?” As we learned with our law firm, the organization must hard wire the new behaviors into the organization by

instituting support structures on a continuous basis (see the Case Study: Seyfarth Shaw sidebar). The activities involved in this effort can run the gamut from

- instituting group coaching
- encouraging peer-coaching pairs
- assigning a coach to every new employee for six months
- assigning a coach to every newly promoted employee (no matter what level)
- offering coaching refresher courses (in-person and online) on a regular basis to keep the language of coaching alive
- providing periodic coaching example videos with real employees volunteering to share their successes
- inserting coaching objectives into every performance evaluation

More is shared under Building Block 3: Systems Approach.

Mindset: Continuum of Behaviors and Mental Models

As coaches, we support a cognitive coaching approach for individuals and entire organizations. In this approach, the coach becomes a thought partner with the coachee—whether the coachee is a subordinate, boss, or colleague or a team, division, vendor, or outside stakeholder. Someone with a coaching mindset helps others identify ways of thinking that may be holding them back professionally, such as adopting a harsh tone of voice in meetings. As the book *Evidence Based Coaching Handbook: Putting Best Practices to Work for Your Clients* points out, changing these behaviors leads to better relationships, improved decision making, and higher levels of performance.

At the basis of cognitive coaching is the notion of “mental models.” A mental model is a belief you hold about the world, often without realizing it; that belief causes you to act in certain ways. Individuals hold mental models, as do entire organizations.

For example, let's say you believe that yelling is the best way to get a team to perform well.

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