

Ten Keys for Successfully Coaching Employees

by Mark Campbell, [M. J. Campbell Associates](#)

How do you retain hard to find technical employees? How do you accomplish more work with less staff? What happens to performance issues that are ignored? A solution to these and other vexing management problems is management coaching. The following recommendations are intended to help you develop your coaching skills.

1. Coaching without compassion is coercion. You pride yourself on being direct and saying what's on your mind. Your mantra is "If people can't handle the truth they should go elsewhere." There are times when we all feel this way, however, in most cases we stop and think before we fire a verbal volley. When faced with a situation where you feel compelled to give constructive feedback consider the following: Does the situation really warrant giving feedback or is the behavior only a mild irritant? Is your attitude punishment or problem solving oriented? Answering these questions can go a long way towards positive coaching. How the coaching is delivered is as important as the actual content.

2. Establish expectations that motivate. In many of my coaching assignments and workshops clients comment that they don't know what is expected of them. One of the primary responsibilities of managers is communicating the organization's vision, mission and goals to employees. When this foundation is not clearly in place, productivity decreases and organizational tension is elevated. Clear and consistent communication results in employees who feel connected to a purpose larger than themselves. Once these basic communication steps are in place then coaching becomes much easier for managers and employees alike.

3. One size does not fit all. Employees learn in very different ways. Some learn best through hands-on practice, others through reading technical manuals or self-study and many by solving problems with a group of colleagues. Level of experience also should be considered when we coach employees. Less experienced people are naturally going to need more attention than their senior colleagues. Coaching must be tailored to each individual with specific learning styles and backgrounds in mind. Whenever you have an opportunity to coach take a minute to adjust your message to fit the individual.

4. Retaining valuable employees through coaching. Surveys repeatedly show that employees remain with organizations when: A) Work is interesting and challenging B) People are well informed about organizational goals C) Recognition is given for good performance and D) Opportunities exist for professional development. By employing effective coaching skills managers can insure that all of these factors are present in the work environment. Managerial skills such as listening, observing, giving constructive feedback, providing recognition and teaching new skills are an integral part of organizations with low turnover. Effective coaching embodies these skills and reduces the revolving door phenomenon for technical professionals.

5. Quick solutions are dangerous. You're very busy. You don't have time to be educating inexperienced people. When they ask questions, you give a quick answer and send them on their way. Does this sound familiar? Certainly this is reality for many managers in today's world. Granted, there are times when all people need is a quick answer, however, there are other times when more effort is required. If we use the expedient approach for all situations we may cut ourselves off from valuable information and create problems that will haunt us in the future. Keep in mind that providing support and encouragement may not take a lot of time. In cases where more time is needed consider it an investment in improved productivity

6. The central coaching skill. There are many skills involved in coaching, however, I believe that exploring options is the central coaching skill. Exploring options to problems with an employee prevents us from giving quick and sometimes faulty solutions to problems. It helps us teach critical thinking, consequences of actions, creativity and cost benefit analysis.

There are two important factors necessary for this process to work: A) The employee must be sufficiently experienced and B) The manager must be knowledgeable in the employees' discipline. Exploring options with employees will assist them in solving similar problems in the future without calling on you for help.

7. The fine art of asking questions. Coaching, in great measure, involves asking questions. The intention is not to embarrass the employee but to help them learn a problem solving process. Effective coaches ask open-ended questions such as: What does the preliminary data tell you? What are the key symptoms? What alternative solutions have you identified? Asking questions, as well as pointing out other resources, is an integral part of coaching. This approach may be more challenging than providing a ready-made solution but it results in autonomous and effective employees.

8. Don't give feedback in a vacuum. In today's business climate most managers are held accountable for both task accomplishment and directing the work of others. Managers frequently get rewarded for technical output more than for coaching, motivating and developing employees. Sometimes they don't speak to employees for weeks. Don't let this happen to you. Set up regularly scheduled meetings with the people reporting to you. Get out and about the organization and develop an informal network. These steps will help you to be well informed coach and manager.

9. The coach and career development. Managers who take an interest in the careers of employees have highly motivated and productive teams. The studies we all read in professional journals indicate that professional growth, especially for technical professionals, is of critical importance. Again and again we hear, "When I stop growing it's time to look for a new job." The consequences of not addressing career issues can result in lower productivity and turnover. Ask people about their aspirations. Whenever possible, assign them work that fits with their career plan. The results will far outweigh the effort expended.

10. Who coaches the coach? Most managers intellectually accept the value of coaching. How to coach is another matter. Reflect on the managers you worked for who were good at this important skill. What did they do that could be applied in your organization? Observe colleagues who are especially talented in this area. Consider designing a mini-survey for employees. Include three or four questions regarding: career plans, reskilling needed and the type of assignments that are most attractive. Have each of your direct reports complete this survey and then meet with each person. Ask what you can do to be helpful in meeting their professional goals. If you do only this, you will surpass most managers as a coach.

It is rare to find a manager in career trouble due to a lack of technical knowledge. However, many a managerial career has been derailed by poor attention to the human side of the job. Take time to coach, it will improve the productivity of your team and enhance your career.

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