

Coaching as a Management Style

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An excerpt from *The Extraordinary Coach: How the Best Leaders Help Others Grow*

What is business coaching?

Say the word coaching and an image immediately comes to mind. For some, the image is an NBA coach who watches his superstar from the sidelines and points out specific actions that the star should take in order to win the game. For others, the image is that of a wise sage offering profound insight about some weighty matter. For others, the term conjures up images of someone answering questions based on lots of experience, like the columnist in the

newspaper who dispenses advice about the thorniest family problems. There are, of course, countless other images and variations of the ones we have just described.

When it comes to business coaching, all of these images are largely incorrect. As a matter of fact, they actually run counter to what we believe high-quality business coaches actually do. On occasion, a skilled business coach does give advice or offer suggestions; however,

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this is not the main thrust of what such a coach does. The best business coaches act as a valuable mirror for their direct reports and help them to better assess what they are doing and how they are doing it.

Management status quo

Coaching seems like a new idea to many managers. One reason for that could well be that societal values have changed dramatically, and our leadership practices have been scrambling to catch up. This is epitomized in the dramatic shift in child-rearing practices. It seems that modern parents spend endless hours negotiating with their children, whereas their

own parents and certainly their grandparents would have been highly directive. The Internet has democratized information so that everyone has access to all but the most guarded, classified information. Globalization has made diversity of backgrounds and styles a welcome practice and a business necessity.

Management practices have evolved to a small degree, but they have not kept pace with what has happened in society. Remarkably little has changed when it comes to the basics of management. Most leaders tend to gravitate to an area on the continuum, usually without much

thought or intention. They do not consciously choose their leadership style; instead, their leadership style is defined over time and by patterns of action. Interestingly, Tannenbaum and Schmidt first articulated the various approaches to leadership—laissez-faire, autocratic, and collaborative—in 1958 and expanded on their original writings in 1973. Tannenbaum and Schmidt noted that the work environments that seemed to function best were those in which there was the most felt and expressed control and influence.

If employees want control and influence in their work environments, which management style is the best? And how does coaching fit in to all this? We will explain the answers to these questions by addressing the three leadership styles (laissez-faire, autocratic, and collaborative), what each looks like, and common reactions of direct reports.

Laissez-faire leadership: who is driving the bus?

What does laissez-faire leadership look like? This would be the leader who is

“hands off” or even absent. Sometimes the laissez-faire leader has good intentions; many leaders adopt this style of leadership with their highest-performing employees, believing that the high performers do not need “managing.”

If you ask who has control and influence in a laissez-faire system, it would seem on the surface that the employees must have them, since the leader seems to be abdicating them. However, if you ask these same employees how much control or influence they feel they have, they will quickly say things like:

- “I’m not sure how I am performing; there is little or no feedback.”
- “There is no clear sense of direction, so I hope that I have been working on the right things.”
- “I feel like I am drifting along, but no one is really paying attention.”

Over time, it seems that employees who are given great latitude (or who are simply ignored) feel untethered and ungrounded. While there seems to be a move toward laissez-faire leadership for some high-potential employees and also for highly tech-

nical personnel, some of the recipients interpret this style as “benign neglect.”

If this is your approach with high performers, or even your overall leadership style, we would challenge you to consider moving toward the middle of the continuum. Your highest performers are often the employees who are most interested in growth and development; treating them with a hands-off approach is a risky strategy indeed.

Autocratic leadership: “my way or the highway”

What does autocratic leadership look like? It includes the highly directive leader who issues orders and commands and the leader whose guidance seems to suggest “my way or the highway.” Who has influence and control in an autocratic system? The leader. Employees feel that they have very little of it, if they have any at all. Over time, this type of leadership system seems to promote compliance rather than commitment on the part of employees. Employees stop bringing forth their good ideas and new ways of thinking about

things, as they know that their ideas will be shunned or overlooked.

Collaborative leadership

In virtually every dimension of Western life outside of business, there has been a remarkable shift from autocratic relationships to much more collaborative interactions. This is true of marriages, parenting, education, and even our local political processes. Still, some business leaders have retained the autocratic style. Why? Some have argued that the collaborative position is the one that requires the greatest effort and the healthiest egos.

What does collaborative leadership look like, and why does it work? You can probably conjure up the image of a leader working alongside [their] employees, genuinely focused on solving problems together. Leaders and employees partner with no threats of power or need to use hierarchy to influence decisions. Leaders are willing to listen and be influenced, and employees, in turn, are more likely to contribute and feel a sense of ownership. Who has control and influence in a collaborative system? Both leaders and employ-

ees feel that their contributions matter and that they can influence both the processes and the end results. That is why the collaborative system works so well: both leaders and employees are invested in the process and the outcomes.

Conclusion

Coaching is the leadership practice that makes the collaborative leadership style work. As Gary Hamel has repeatedly argued, the underlying philosophy and leadership practices that are in vogue today were established in the early decades of the twentieth century, when the objec-

tive was to get semiskilled individuals to perform tasks repeatedly with ever-greater efficiency. Organizations need to become more inspiring and more human in order to meet the needs of the people who populate them today. Coaching is one of the best ways to achieve this, creating greater interaction between leaders and direct reports, and thereby aligning goals and progress.

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About Us

Zenger Folkman relentlessly seeks to rise above the inconsistent, and sometimes misleading, nature of popular leadership philosophies and beliefs brought on by opinion. The discipline of leadership and those who pursue it deserve better. Our most valuable asset is the expertise of combining hard data and statistical analysis with logical explanations and actionable application that help individual leaders thrive and organizations succeed.