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Preparing to coach people

SETTING THE SCENE FOR WORKPLACE COACHING

The traditional role of a line manager in an organization has not included the development/continuous improvement of his or her people. We would be wealthy men if we pocketed a dollar for every time someone on the shop floor or in the workplace complained about the lack of feedback on performance or the lack of opportunity to receive further development, in line with the changes to their job requirements.

Traditional forms of supervision differ from our workplace coaching because these focus on communicating with people only when they 'mess up'. This is not to say that all supervisors in the past operated this way, but in our experience the majority did. This was the industrial policeman-type mentality where people got the feeling they were being watched with a view to catching them out.

It was this environment which led to Frank's chapter, 'From cop to coach: the shop floor supervisor'[1] of the 1990s in *The Return of the Mentor(s)* referred to in the introduction to this book. There were several key messages. Although the story is circa 1993, it was a milestone in improved workplace relationships – a change in the way people work together. Some of these messages were:

❚ If workers saw supervisors in a policing role, interested only in controlling and speaking to them when they got something wrong, the culture would never be a productive one.

❚ Supervisors were not there in the capacity of industrial police but coaches who communicate and consult with the work team – working together to continuously improve and enjoy work.

❚ The word 'supervisor' was an out-of-date term; rather, it was the line manager or team leader who is the human face of the organization, presenting that clear link with the people who actually do the work.

❚ Team leaders were facilitators who assisted the work group through greater involvement and ownership. A facilitation role built on workplace coaching. (People who see supervision as supervising a process to get an output, forget that it is the people who keep this happening day after day.)

These messages really demonstrate how inappropriate a word like 'supervisor' is. We have always preferred 'line manager' or 'team leader'. These are the people who facilitate the role of the work team. They must be the coaches and mentors of the work team from the time they enter the workplace, and over their time at the organization.

Further messages are clearly focused on the need for a line manager to move outside what has been the traditional role and incorporate the role of a workplace coach. Before looking in detail at what makes a good workplace coach, we need to confirm the importance of having the right people as line managers (and coaches) and having the right team members to coach.

This raises a critical aspect of team performance. How does a new member get to be selected to join the team? Who selects the new team member? We have heard line managers many times respond to questions about an under-performing person – 'Well, I didn't pick them!' It is the job of the line manager to hire his or her team. It involves selection, recruitment and retention. The clear objective is to hire people who perform to the standards and will conduct themselves in ways that contribute to a safe, healthy, enjoyable and harassment-free workplace. It is about asking each individual member of the team to become his or her own policeman and to watch over his or her own performance and behaviour.

We suspect there is not a line manager reading these words who has not at some time recruited a person whom they thought was right for the job, and realized later they had made a mistake (sometimes a monumental one) either in terms of cost, irreparable damage to the way the team works together, or both. We pick this up in Chapter 7 from a different perspective – moving from coaching to discipline.

If we had a magic solution to deal with this problem we would spend our entire waking lives letting people into the secret. The bottom line is, there is no foolproof way of ensuring you get the right person. However, by clearly specifying our expectations of team members, the risk of error in selection can be greatly reduced. One aspect of the specification should be that the person is keen, has a thirst for learning and a commitment to helping others.

It is our view, whether we are dealing with an established business or one which is new, the process supporting selection and recruitment is the same. The starting points are: *how is the job designed* and *how will the work be organized?*

We stress again, it is not our intention to turn you into a recruitment specialist, but to introduce you briefly to a process that will help you to adopt your rightful role in being involved in determining who will become a member of your team and the expectations to be met.

Teams

Before we move on, we need to say something about teams. The word 'teams' has probably been done to death over the last 10 to 15 years, but we honestly can't find anything to replace it. One aspect of teams that is seldom made clear in discussions is the different types of teams and how team behaviour will need to vary to fit the particular type of team.

Many people only think of teams as a typical sporting team – a coach (who may also be captain) who we would call a line manager, and a group of players, all available to play the same game (albeit with different but contributory roles). The fact is, every team is different! You cannot simply apply one set of principles to the multitude of different teams. You need to form the most appropriate team for a particular workplace and then adopt other systems to fit that team model.

We do not propose to go into this in great depth here, but present a couple of examples. First, there is the type of team described above such as a golf team (for example, Ryder Cup), or tennis team (Davis Cup) in which the players may practise together, discuss their performances and help each other, but actually play the game as an individual, or in the case of doubles, a pair. Where this type of team occurs in the workplace, it needs to have a purpose-built method of operation. The other 'team', which is often not seen as a team as such, is the hierarchical team made up of different levels of managers. There is no reason why it can't operate as a team – it just means that there has to be some adaptation. The important thing here is that workplace coaching can operate in any team of any type – it simply requires some adjustment to meet the particular circumstances of the organization.

JOB DESIGN/WORK ORGANIZATION

The examination of the work process should allow you to determine what will be required of team members to achieve the work outcomes needed to meet the performance standards and code of conduct. There is considerable evidence to suggest organizations fail to consider job design or work reorganization as a vacancy arises – consequently missing frequent opportunities to streamline and continuously improve the way work is done. When this occurs, a reassessment needs to be undertaken.

The determination of the extent of multi-skilling versus specialization, the number of people needed, the technology that may be available to improve the way work is done, are not often considered. The response is more often, 'The assistant accountant has resigned – you had better advertise the job.'

The role of the workplace coach should require a more active role in getting the right people on your team by:

▌ reviewing job descriptions;

▌ specifying the type of person you need to take on the job (therefore reducing the chances of a mismatch occurring);

▌ selecting people based on demonstrated ability or potential to perform to the standard the organization expects, not on what they have or have not done (or say they have done);

▌ ensuring the code of conduct is clearly stated and communicated during the selection process;

▌ assessing applicants' responses to the code of conduct through 'what if' scenarios (here you do not want nodding responses to advice on, say, sexual harassment or zero tolerance on drugs; rather what will or won't be accepted. This clarity of expectations has often caused an applicant to withdraw);

▌ assessing applicants' commitment to learning and to providing assistance to other team members.

The key to this process is to elicit views from applicants up front about their work ethic and their idea of how a workplace should function, prior to receiving responses to specific questions.

PERFORMANCE-BASED SELECTION

Equally important as the communication of the code of conduct to potential applicants, is the communication of the performance standards that apply to work and the nature of the job itself – particularly the difficult or unpleasant parts.

In many of the organizations we work with, it has become commonplace to double interview (even for lower level jobs). The first interview is to reduce the numbers; then some quality time can be spent with the remaining applicants, seeking responses to performance expectations and, where practicable, to set tasks that assess competence and confidence in meeting the specified standards. For many jobs, the best criterion for selection is to ask applicants to demonstrate their capabilities and then assess their performance accordingly.

Where setting practical tasks is impossible or inappropriate, such as with higher level positions or for health and safety reasons, a series of case studies, scenarios or in-basket activities can provide considerable insight into the ability and/or potential of applicants to meet expectations. For example, teachers should be asked to take classes of full duration based on typical student groups.

The debrief of such activities/selection techniques is critical, as it also provides the applicant with a good 'feel' for whether he or she can handle the job. For example, the applicant may well decide this is not the job he or she wants to do, or the organization is not one he or she wants to work for. Better to find out then rather than later. Unfortunately, many organizations rely entirely on an interview and referee reports to make their selection. It is worth bearing in mind that people do misrepresent themselves at selection interviews.

A comment

There are some classic tales of people gaining employment under false pretences. For example, there was a deputy general manager who gave a referee for a job he had never held, and an academic who was appointed Head of School based on postgraduate qualifications he had never completed. The most common mistakes are contacting only the referees provided and not checking with other previous employers or other records. The results can be frightening. We have come across an accountant who had been in prison for embezzlement; a supervisor who had been sacked from three meat works for bullying and assault; a senior manager with several psychiatric problems; and a convicted paedophile appointed as head of a child care centre.

In summary, we emphasize that the coach must be involved in the selection and recruitment of people for his or her team. Successful recruitment requires both a job description (including a company profile) and a person specification.

INDUCTION

To be a successful member of a team requires a thorough induction to the workplace, the team and the organization. It is during the first few hours, days and months that the employee relationship is established (ideally with little ambiguity). It is the time when principles and practice of performance feedback are embedded. It is also the time when it becomes clear to new personnel that it is a major objective of the organization to continuously prepare, plan and deliver on learning needs to maximize performance and individual competence. Team members must also be encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning.

Any induction should include a formal introduction to coaching and/or mentoring as a part of the organization's everyday working life. Workplace coaching begins from day one.

Finally, probation must be part of those early days of exposure. This is where new team members are brought into contact with performance standards and the code of conduct for the first time. It is essential that the probation period be based on a development plan.

Through what E Wight Bakke[2] called a 'fusion' process the principles and practice of performance feedback, based on early intervention (and in relation to excellent performance or underperformance), are made absolutely clear. This is where continuous feedback is based on 'no surprises' as part and parcel of the way the teams function. This is also where linkages are made to how the induction tools are used by the workplace coach to determine any training and development needs for the individual and the team, and how plans to do so are developed, implemented and measured for success.

In summary, we see workplace coaching as an interpersonal approach by a manager or team leader to continuously improve the capability and/or conduct of both the individual and the team.

WHAT IS A WORKPLACE COACH?

Workplace coaching is the cornerstone of our approach to people management. Anyone who wants to be a competent coach, and is prepared to develop

some basic skills, can be a competent coach. Right now you are probably asking yourself, what is required for a coach to be successful? How do we select and train those people we believe to have the potential to carry out the role? Clearly there is no magic formula for selecting coaches; it depends on the game you are playing. Some great coaches have been great players, but then many great players have failed as coaches. High technical ability may be an asset or it may be a liability.

Many of you would argue that a good coach is above all a good communicator. A good communicator is one who can deliver a message clearly and simply, is a good, active, empathetic listener and behaves in a manner that is consistent with the message that is being delivered. A role model!

The line manager is a workplace coach who will survive on his or her capability to be consistent in words and action – people saying one thing but doing something different will guarantee negativity and ultimately failure. Many of us have seen these double standards and corruption in the community and workplace generally. We must ensure we do not have corrupt coaches – coaches with double standards will fail. A coach must have a mental toughness, the courage of his or her conviction and be credible. The simple message is: both words and action are critical to success.

Workplace coaching is about developing trust between all members of the team and an understanding that regular day-to-day feedback will be provided in a way that is valid, reliable, consistent and fair. Trust will allow an acceptance that all team members can expect to be told, in a non-threatening way, when they are performing excellently or when they are underperforming.

When we have worked with companies in identifying the features of an excellent coach, a broad canvas is painted. They say an excellent coach must be an active listener; be respected (not necessarily liked) by team members as a professional (have integrity and honesty, be patient and direct); be supportive but provide freedom to initiate; be a role model and a setter of standards, using a supportive approach to mistakes, yet using mistakes as a learning opportunity.

These companies say a coach must also be an accurate observer of work activities. Not observation by spying, but timing his or her presence in the workplace to ensure team members know that the emphasis is more an interest in and enthusiasm for what is going on whilst being there to assist if necessary. 'You cannot expect to know what is going on if you are not in the street every day'. This means being involved in the daily work of the workplace; being alongside, not over.

Familiarity or friendship are not prerequisites to being an effective coach. In many ways coaches, like teachers, should have a sense of vocation. They are born, not made. However, with training and feedback, we can make them

better teachers and coaches. To be successful, both the words and the action are critical.

We now turn to a process for developing coaches to be both competent and confident. People who are able to set the mood, tone and behaviour for coaching in the workplace and then do it in a way which demonstrates their actions, are both consistent and sustainable. They demonstrate success for all team members and ultimately the organization.

Workplace coaching activities

We see coaching as continuous personal interaction and (where required) intervention in the team's activities, to lift, sustain and improve the performance of the individual and the team. Intervention for the purposes of coaching may occur at any time, but particularly when a coach detects excellent performance or underperformance. Intervention may take the form of encouragement, recognition, praise, advice, demonstration, training or any other form of learning to improve competence or behaviour. It can also focus on building confidence, which supports performance.

We use the words 'workplace coaching' to describe a set of interrelated activities:

❚ clarifying expectations;

❚ providing feedback in the workplace as close to the event as possible (early intervention);

❚ making coaching part of the line manager's style of dealing with members of his or her work team;

❚ making the workplace more comfortable and satisfactory for team members so that they can accept both positive and negative feedback in the spirit of coaching – we are here not only to achieve excellent results but to enjoy our work and interaction with other team members;

❚ targeting areas where performance or behaviour need to be improved and then acting by developing plans to improve individual or team performance and/or to recognize excellent performance (this must include follow-up and assessment of outcomes/results).

You may recall that Figure 1.1 (see page 17) stressed the importance of making sure that the expectations and standards for performance are made clear and abided by across the entire work team. These expectations provide the criteria against which excellence or underperformance can be judged.

For workplace coaching to move from the specification of performance to an interactive process in the workplace where the line manager provides day-to-day feedback, a clear set of principles needs to be established to guide all line managers. These will include performance and behaviour.

These principles, like expectations, must be agreed to and a commitment made to abide by them. We issue a strong warning – just as finger prints and snow flakes are all different, so too are organizations. A set of principles for one organization may not work so well for another. Organizations should develop their own set of principles with the involvement of senior managers and line managers.

Principles of workplace coaching

The list below is not a single recipe for success but a sample from organizations we have worked with that have accepted workplace coaching as the driving force of managing people. The list provides line managers with the basis for a set of rules within which successful coaching can occur.

WORKPLACE COACHING SHOULD:

- provide for regular day-to-day, on the job feedback based on early intervention;
- provide for genuine two-way feedback (coach to team member – member to coach);
- provide encouragement;
- have formal criteria (established and agreed expectations) for measuring performance and behaviour;
- observe and confirm excellent performance;
- include various ways of providing feedback;
- be relevant for each individual;
- link individual goals to team and organizational goals;
- be simple and practical with minimum paperwork;
- be cost/time effective;
- have no surprises;

❙ emphasize continuous improvement;

❙ identify and deliver the development needs of individuals and teams.

This may look like a list of 'motherhood' statements, but really they are guiding principles as to how coaches will operate within the organization. To embed these principles, the environment within which they are to be applied must be transparent.

Taking stock

We have so far stressed the importance of line managers seeing themselves as coaches who facilitate the activities of work teams through clear and simple communication based on continuous feedback for both excellence and underperformance. Coaches work within a culture each helped to make, based on respect and integrity (but are not necessarily liked).

Workplace coaching must include the provision of feedback within an environment that is comfortable and satisfactory for all. Above all, workplace coaching must focus on the continuous pursuit of improvement based on clear and deliverable development plans, which are monitored.

All workplace coaches must have been involved in, agreed to and committed to a set of guiding principles. These principles will be different for each organization. What is not different is that the feedback activities will fall into two different but interlinked environments – inside the workplace (on the job) and outside the workplace (during a formal review). Outside the workplace can be any suitable venue which is private, relatively quiet and free from unnecessary interruption. Both are important, both have their place, but it is the feedback inside the workplace which builds the foundation for any feedback outside the workplace during the formal review – time out to sit down and discuss performance and behaviour.

The model in Figure 3.1 provides an overview of the key features of each: who is involved (coach, individual, team), when (close to the event, before or after an event), when again (present time, past), what (practical/operational, strategic/tactical), where (in the workplace, away from the work site).

An explanation of how each is applied is the focus of the next two chapters, which deal with how to do it, taking the principles of workplace coaching and doing it under operational conditions.

Off the job – outside the workplace (During a formal review)	On the job – inside the workplace (During work activities)
· With individual and team	· With the individual
· Before and after an 'event'	· Close to the 'event'
· It is 'reflective' (past performance)	· It is now (present time)

· It is both strategic and tactical (future)
  - where do we want to be in six months?
  - what plan do we need to improve?
	· It is tactical/operational
	  - it is 'now' time – today
	  - supported by follow-up outside the
	    workplace

· Reinforcement	· Early intervention
· Defining standards/expectations	· Incident/event based
· Planning how to improve	· Praising excellent performance
· Implementing plan	

Figure 3.1   Overview of off the job/on the job feedback

NOTES

1. Remember that the word 'supervisor' literally means 'watching over'. One of the interesting aspects of this terminology, 'from cop to coach' is that it is actually out of date. Police in many parts of the world, whilst still carrying out their traditional role of monitoring the community for compliance with the law, have moved to community policing – in a sense, doing some coaching, trying to prevent breaches of the law and helping those people/communities who need some assistance to develop a culture of compliance.

2. E Wight Bakke papers, 1929–71 (bulk 1945–70) #5960, Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library.