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## Coaching: The Ten Killer Myths

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## Coaching: The Ten Killer Myths

**Y**OU KNOW that everyone is supposed to be a *coach* rather than a manager these days. You know something else, too: most of the managers you talk to are acting pretty much the way they always did. The reasons aren't hard to fathom. Not many people have a clear idea of what coaching means in practice. Those who do know something about it are likely to find it daunting. So coaching becomes one of those good ideas that many managers pay lip service to, then ignore.

But coaching isn't mystical; it isn't even hard to learn. In fact, all that may be necessary is to rid yourself of some common misconceptions. Herewith the ten most common myths, and the reality behind them.

### **MYTH** Nobody can really define coaching.

Nonsense, says Cathy Joy, a San Francisco-based coach and product designer for Interaction Associates: Definition is what coaching is all about. Coaching means helping people define clear goals and set a specific time frame in which to meet them. The goals can be anything from overcoming a problem with personal interactions to achieving a professional objective.

**KEY POINT:** Coaching is a well-defined process, with start points and end points. What's different about it—and what may throw some managers off—is that the heart of the process is a person's potential. So success is not easy to quantify.

### **MYTH** Coaching is managing with a happy face.

Many managers think coaching means doing what they already do while being more "supportive" of their employees' feelings. This couldn't be more wrong, says James Waldroop, a director of the

career development program at Harvard Business School and a principal in the consulting firm of Waldroop Butler Associates in Brookline, Mass. "Managing is getting something done. It has to do with the mission of the organization and carrying out that mission in specific tactical operations. When I'm managing I have two focuses: I'm looking over your shoulder at the job I want done and then I'm looking back at you. In coaching, I'm just looking at you."

**KEY POINT:** Making sure someone achieves certain performance levels is managing. Helping them handle problems for themselves is coaching.

### **MYTH** Coaching is just another name for mentoring.

This may scare off more managers than anything else, says Waldroop. But mentoring is a long-term relationship, while coaching is time-limited. "Mentoring is...an open-ended, non-specific contract. It's saying, 'I'm going to be your big brother and I'm going to be around for an uncertain amount of time—usually quite a long period—to serve this role, to take whatever issue you want and work with it.' That is not a coaching contract. A coaching contract is for a specified period of time, to work on specific issues with measurable outcomes that we measure every step of the way." Mentoring also carries more emotional baggage, says Interaction Associates' Joy. "Mentoring has the connotation of bringing up someone in your own image. Coaching doesn't have that."

**KEY POINT:** A coach is more dispassionate than a mentor. If someone fails to live up to a commitment, a mentor might say, "You're disappointing me." Coaches say: "This is what you said you wanted, and you're not doing it."

### **MYTH** Being a coach means being a cheerleader.

Many managers think coaching is the same as yelling "Go Team Go!" Not so, says Timothy Butler, also a director of Harvard's career development program: "If you're experiencing your role as a cheerleader, you've really got to reexamine your mission. All coaching begins with a hard look at a person's weaknesses as well as strengths." Joy agrees that coaching isn't just cheerleading: "It's very action-oriented." Find out what people want in their work, she advises. Help them figure out how to get there.

**KEY POINT:** A coach doesn't just praise an individual's efforts. A coach helps people understand what they need to change in order to attain their professional goals.

### **MYTH** Coaching takes a lot of time.

Fear of time commitment discourages a lot of people from coaching—and they're not wholly wrong. "It's not going to eat up all your time, but it is going to take time," says Butler. "You need to be aware of that and budget for it before you take on the commitment." Joy, however, argues that coaching can be time-limited. "Good managers can coach only about five percent of the time," she says—and they'll eventually find that coaching saves time. "In the long run there's a much bigger payoff because you're fostering independence in people. You're teaching people to solve problems for themselves."

**KEY POINT:** Coaching relationships can last anywhere from three months to two years, depending on what the coachee is trying to accomplish. But during that period it should take at most 30–45 minutes a week. That's the time you spend checking on what someone has done since you last spoke and figuring out what steps he or she should take next.

### **MYTH** Coaching is a kind of psychotherapy.

This myth, too, contains a kernel of truth, says Waldroop. "Managers fre-

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quently shy away from coaching because they're afraid it's going to require them to be psychologists—they're going to pry into some deep, dark secrets of the coachee. The truth is, they *do* have to be some sort of psychologist to understand the behaviors they are seeing and talk about them. But you don't have to have a degree in psychiatry to be good coach. You just have to be psychologically minded and deal with personal and emotional issues. And that happens anyway. You can't do business without it."

Joy adds, "The distinction between coaching and therapy is that therapy typically focuses on a problem that needs to be fixed—and the way to fix it is by going into the person's psychology and emotional history. Coaching looks at the present and goes forward. It's always future-oriented."

**KEY POINT:** Coaches, like all businesspeople, need to have a grasp of psychology, such as what motivates people. But coaching focuses on what to do now, not on what went wrong in the dim past.

### **MYTH** One recipe can handle all coaching situations.

"Coaching is not mechanical," says Butler. "It brings to bear [the coach's] knowledge of business, politics—how things work—and psychology. People who fail at coaching assignments typically...have a program, a formula. [They say,] 'You're going to go here, you're going to do this, you're going to do that. We're going to give you all this feedback and then you're going to be a changed man or woman.' It doesn't happen because it's not personal enough. It's not deep enough."

**KEY POINT:** There is no "one size fits all" approach to coaching. Just as individuals and their goals are different, so is what each person needs to learn to achieve them.

### **MYTH** Some people just can't be coached.

If a coaching relationship doesn't work—for example, if the coachee is

unresponsive—some managers conclude that the person is "uncoachable." But it takes two to mess up this particular tango: if the other person isn't responding it may be your footwork that's at fault, says Joy. "This is a typical problem with managers because they underestimate the impact of their authority. If it's really not working, you need to start looking at what's holding people back. Don't assume the person is broken in some way."

**KEY POINT:** If an individual is truly unreceptive to your coaching, there may be other problems in your relationship or in your coaching style. Try the person with a different coach before writing him or her off as uncoachable.

### **MYTH** If you successfully coach people, they may leave.

Some managers fear that helping someone achieve a professional goal will encourage the person to quit and look for something better. Yes and no, says Joy. "Most [employees] are looking for people who will invest in their professional development. Coaching is one of the best tools for that. Sometimes people do leave—but if they're ready to leave, you don't want them there anyway. Mostly, people walk around with a lot of untapped resources. Once they start to discover them and see how they can apply them and have an impact in their work, there's more jazz that comes from that. They're more excited about their work. Typical management may miss that."

**KEY POINT:** While some employees who achieve new goals will leave, far more will feel greater loyalty to an organization that is interested in their professional development.

### **MYTH** Coaching doesn't add to the bottom line.

Many executives view coaching as a "soft skill"—that is, one that has no immediate effect on the numbers. "People think you're just listening and [ask], 'What good does that do?'" says Joy. "The truth is that coaching produces more consistent, replicable results than a lot of other management

approaches." Coaching taps people's creativity. It encourages them to be more flexible and adaptable. That kind of response from employees can have a substantial effect on the bottom line.

Still, you have to husband your coaching resources. According to Butler, the only people you should take time to coach are those who will eventually have a big impact on the organization. "Coaching is an investment in a person," he says. "It's...an investment that's going to really pay off, but not for the next business goal. You're not coaching someone to meet the next month's numbers—that's not coaching any more, that's managing, even if you call it coaching. But if you see this person is a high-quality sales manager and you think two quarters from now they're really going to take the lead, then that's coaching."

**KEY POINT:** Coaching can have a positive impact on performance, but it is not a short-term process. Coaching prospects should be people you think can be even greater assets to the organization than they already are. ■

—Constantine von Hoffman

### If you want to learn more...

*Coaching: Evoking Excellence in Others* by James Flaherty (1998, Butterworth-Heinemann, 176 pp., \$18.95, Tel: 800-366-2665)

*Coaching and Counseling: A Practical Guide for Managers and Team Leaders (50-Minute Series)* by Marianne Minor (1996, Crisp Publications, 79 pp., \$10.95, Tel: 800-442-7477)

*Coaching for Peak Employee Performance: A Practical Guide to Supporting Employee Development (Management Skills Series)* by Bill Foster and Karen R. Seeker (1997, Richard Chang Assoc., Inc., 120 pp., \$12.95, Tel: 800-756-8096 or 949-727-7477)

*Coaching for Performance (People Skills for Professionals)* by John Whitmore (1996, Nicholas Brealey Publisher, 168 pp., \$15.95, Tel: 800-533-0301)

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