

EVENT-DRIVEN COACHING: *Building a Performance Culture One Employee at a Time*

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Change, in most areas of our lives, is driven by events. We change our eating, smoking, or exercises habits only after a significant health scare. We put an alarm system in our homes or cars, only after a burglary or a break-in. We became focused on air travel safety and passenger / luggage screening only after the tragic events of 9-11. Products get recalled after an injury or death; grates or safety railings go up after someone has fallen; and organizations make changes, through training, new policies, or updated procedures, only after a problem erupts, the threat of litigation, bad publicity, or a class-action settlement.

As a coach, I most often get called to help in situations where the person in question has sexually harassed a co-worker or subordinate; victimized others with yet another angry outburst; or somehow violated the boundaries of the organization for the umpteenth time. The work I do in these events could be called "career rescue," because the organization has had it with the employee in question and they are quite close to termination.

And yet, senior management (often driven by the HR office) holds out hope that if I can succeed in changing the employee's behavior, they can salvage the relationship, the position, and the quality of the employee's work product or performance. One of the ironies of these circumstances is that the quality of these employees' work is often quite good, as they are often excellent salespeople, programmers, engineers, etc., but are plagued with either a terrible personality, a complete lack of social intelligence, or both.

At this stage and as a management subject, the coaching process has too much mystery surrounding it. It's not about helping employees find their "inner" selves; it's about providing them with useful tools for improvement, solving behavioral problems, and helping them move ahead with their careers. Too many people involved with coaching, internally and externally to the organization, think they can "fix" everybody, regardless of their issues.

This rarely works and what's worse, they think more sessions are better. Coaching is not a car wash – "dirty" employees going in one end of a closed system and coming out "clean" at the other. Coaching is not psychotherapy; it's about matching the right coach for the right employee and working together on a well-defined process for skill-building. And coaching, at least in a business setting, is not about helping the employee take a "spiritual journey of self-discovery."

The new landscape of coaching has succeeded in dividing itself into two "armed camps": one - the "life coaches," who help people develop greater creative, spiritual, or even neo-cosmic insight into themselves and two – "executive, management, and employee-level coaches," who tend to focus on either strategic improvement, career skills or management development, or problem-fixing for employees who are in career jeopardy.

Neither side thinks the other has much of a handle on the coaching process, with the former group seeing the latter as lacking humanistic compassion, and too focused on outcomes and efficiencies, and the latter seeing the former as flighty, too superficial, and not solution-focused enough to be taken serious by senior management.

For senior management buy-in, we need to apply proven coaching success tools that can demonstrate that there has been progress, improvement, and that they will see the “new and improved” employee as a result of the intervention.

While it’s not always necessary to be perceived as a *mentor* in the coaching relationship, it helps to have acquired enough life and work experience (with or without the accompanying gray hairs) to resonate credibility with the coachee / client. From my perspective, the coach-as-mentor role is enhanced when the other person can look at the coach’s body of work and experience and say (either internally or aloud), “This person has done what I want to do, been where I want to go, and said what I want to be able to say. As such, I feel comfortable and ready to follow his or her lead.”

The absence of this trust makes the coaching commitment much more difficult, which is why I believe rapport building is the key to early success in any coaching intervention. Since we already know juries make decisions about whether they like certain attorneys, even before they begin their opening arguments, or customers instantly like or dislike salespeople, even before hearing their product or service pitch, then the first impressions in coaching, means something significant as well.

From my perspective, there are four common dimensions for a coaching intervention:

Category 1: Strategic – for senior executives; the focus is on the long-term direction of their business, department, or career goals.

Category 2: Developmental – for managers and supervisors; the focus is on problem solving, managing their “Bug List,” employee supervision issues, team or individual conflicts, delegation, time management, and stress management.

Category 3: Corrective (a/k/a “career rescue”) – for managers, supervisors, and employees who “don’t get it.” The focus is on helping them understand the negative impact of certain behaviors on their jobs and with others, then getting them to comply, change, or stop them. Issues include anger management, sexual harassment, micro-managing, or aggression.

Category 4: Special-Purpose – for high-risk HR cases involving on or off-the-job threats to employees or the organization.

My experience suggests that these coaching interventions are almost always ***driven by events***:

- a sharp downturn in the business success of the department or the organization;
- the failing “mental health” of the executive level or departmental management teams;
- topped-out career advancement problems with certain apathetic employees;
- departmental conflicts between work groups and related team performance problems;

- employee behavioral issues related to their compliance problems (sexual harassment, anger management, off-the-job concerns spilling over to work, suspicion of drugs and alcohol use);
- angry/threatening employees.

Besides using coaching techniques for individual problem-solving sessions, the coaching concept has applications for group problem-solving sessions as well. Further, I have had good success using group coaching methods in what could best be described as “one-hour, bosses-only, bull sessions.” Here, I gather small groups of managers or supervisors (with every group member at the same peer level as the other participants) and simply ask them some key questions: “What’s bugging you, individually and as a group? What would you like me to speak to senior management about? What do you want them to fix, right now? What’s good about working here? What do we need to keep doing? What do we need to stop doing? What do we need to start doing?”

Once there has been some venting, some air clearing, and we’ve created a laundry list of sorts to take to senior management, I switch the focus to a lecturette on a topic that seems to have particular interest for the participants, that day. We talk and exchange ideas and solutions. After an hour, it’s over and they go back to work. Next week, or in two weeks, or next month, I’ll do it again. Many managers and supervisors have told me that they feel refreshed, energized, and *heard* after these sessions. (They also suggest that meetings like these are quite rare in their organizations; too much time is spent working and not enough time is spent on listening.)

Perhaps it helps to look at the four coaching styles as part of a bell curve. The Strategic and Special interventions are on either end (since they are rarer, statistically and operationally), and then the other two are in the middle – Developmental and Corrective. Since the majority of coaching time may be spent with people needing these middle range services, I’ve developed a chart to give archetypal labels to four possible candidates from these two. I believe it helps to generalize and describe certain coachees in terms of their stereotypical behavior. Many of the colleagues to whom I have showed the following chart, instantly recognize colleagues and subordinates from their own organizations.

The modalities described in the chart below are:

The Smart Slacker – Been there a long time, “retired on duty,” doesn’t want to break a sweat. Knows how to do the work but doesn’t really want to if he/she doesn’t have to. Can appear to work hard when the boss is around. Has lots of knowledge (and could make a real and valuable contribution because of his/her history with the company, the collected and stored knowledge, lots of training, and much experience). Upside: Could be helped by coaching if we can find the “on” button. Downside: “On” button is often hidden by lots of layers or baggage. These types are at top-step, often overpaid (two new employees could do the work of this one, at least per the salary costs), can’t be promoted, don’t want to move or change jobs, and feel they can’t be fired as long as they just show up every day. Potential contribution to the success of the department or firm is high; actual or real contribution is low.

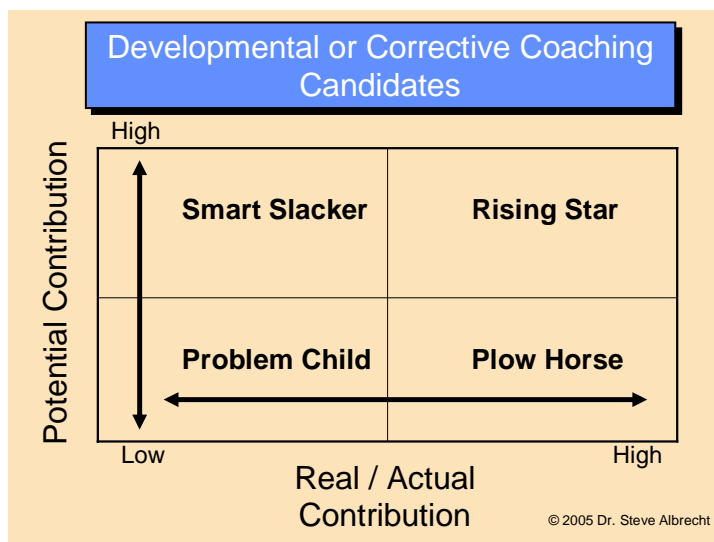
The Problem Child – Two possibilities here: acute problems (good worker who suddenly reveal serious off-the-job baggage) or chronic problems (has been a Problem Child since Hire Day One). Acute PC’s should be offered support, access to counseling, and an Individual Development / Performance Improvement Plan. Chronic PC’s should be given progressive

discipline, last warnings, and then termination. Potential and actual contributions are usually quite low.

The Plow Horse – Good worker, does the job he/she is paid to do, but does it without much imagination. Gets to work at 8, leaves at 5. Doesn't cause problem, but sits on the plow whenever he/she hits a rock, waiting for a boss to tell him /her how to solve the problem. Gets "working at standard" evaluations and is largely happy doing what they were hired to do. May be fearful of the stress and responsibility of advancement, so they won't look for career help. Happy at their level, doesn't want too much on their plates. Actual contribution is high, but their potential contribution is unknown or untapped by bosses who don't want to take the time to delve into the world of their possibilities.

The Shining Star – Upside: easy to delegate to, loves more responsibility, works hard without being asked / reminded. Goes the extra mile to get / earn "Above Standard" evaluations. Downside: may be perceived as Teacher's Pet by the other employees, may treat them badly when the boss isn't around, acting imperially and self-satisfied. It's possible and likely bosses can burn these people out with too much work, too much autonomy, and not enough reward. Good coaches will get these people on to a career path that plays to their strengths and improves their weaknesses.

This chart pays homage to the Blanchard-Hersey model for Situational Leadership™, e.g., the employee's willingness versus the employee's ability. Here, I'm seeking to assess (albeit stereotypically) an employee's potential contribution to his/her team, department, and/or organization, versus his / her actual contribution.



The goal of coaching is to see where an employee might appear on this chart. The function of coaching is to move him or her to the top right position, as quickly and as effectively as possible.