

Coaching is great for developing people's skills and abilities.

You've probably heard people talking about coaching in the workplace. You might have even received some coaching in the past, or you might have used coaching to improve a person's performance, even if you didn't actually describe it as "coaching" at the time.

But what actually is coaching, and how do you use it? And what skills do you need to be an effective coach?

About Coaching

Coaching is a useful way of developing people's skills and abilities, and of boosting performance. It can also help deal with issues and challenges before they become major problems.

Although coaching in the workplace is just as important as coaching in sport, the approach is different. Sports coaches mentor their athletes, using technical skills, experience, and a "telling" style of direction. By contrast, questioning and reflection are often more important in workplace coaching.

A coaching session will typically take place as a conversation between the coach and the coachee (person being coached), and it focuses on helping the coachee discover answers for themselves. After all, people are much more likely to engage with solutions that they have come up with themselves, rather than those that are forced upon them!

Coaches in the workplace are not counselors, psychotherapists, gurus, teachers, trainers, or consultants – although they may use some of the same skills and tools.

Managers and leaders in the organization can be just as effective as externally hired coaches. Managers don't have to be trained formally as coaches. As long as they stay within the scope of their skill set, and maintain a structured approach, they can add value, and help develop their people's skills and abilities.

Where Coaching Can Help

Here are a few examples of questions that you can answer with the benefit of coaching:

- How can I manage my time better to achieve all I want in life?
 - What should I do next in my career within the organization?
 - How can I reduce the stress in my job or my life?
 - How can I achieve a better balance between work life and home life?
 - What skills do I need to grow and develop further?
 - How can I improve my relationship with a specific colleague?
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Golden Rules of Coaching

These are the fundamental "rules" of coaching:

Coaching is Founded on Confidentiality and Trust

Coaching can be successful only if coachees are able to discuss every aspect of an issue or challenge with their coach. The coach may need to listen to personal problems or private information that must be kept confidential. (Unless, of course, it involves criminal activity or activities harmful to the team, its clients or the organization; or affects the safety and welfare of other people.)

The Solution to the Coachee's Issue Lies Within the Coachee

This may sound unusual, but it means that the background of an issue and the options available are generally known to the coachee. The coach's job is to ask the right questions to help coachees arrive at their own conclusions. As we've said before, this is a very powerful way of helping people to change.

Of course, the coach can provide helpful input or suggestions, but the best answers usually come from the coachee.

Tip:

There's a difference here between the type of coaching conducted by a professional coach (who doesn't know about the day-to-day functioning of the organization) and coaching conducted by a manager (who does). As a manager, you probably have useful knowledge and experience, and you're responsible for helping people find the right answers to questions they're asking. However, be sensitive and humble in the way you help people – situations may be more complex than you initially think!

There's no Judgment or Fixed Agenda, but Have an Agreed Goal for Each Session

For a coaching session to work well, there should be a lot of relaxed conversation, and the session should be free from the fear of judgment and should not follow any set pattern. At the same time, coaching conversations must be focused in order to be effective.

The coachee should have a general idea or outline of the objectives of the coaching, both within the specific session and in the longer term. The coach then helps the coachee arrive at that destination by whatever route seems appropriate. The coach should check with the coachee during the session to determine if they're both moving in the right direction.

Coaching is About the Whole Person

Although a coaching session will probably focus on one issue, coaches must remember that they're having a conversation with a whole person who has specific experiences, emotions, and patterns of behavior.

Workplace coaching will probably focus on workplace issues, but coaches must recognize that other factors and issues will likely enter the conversation.

The Coach and Coachee are Equal Partners

The best coaching conversations are set up so that the coach and coachee are equal partners, whatever relationship and hierarchy might exist in the workplace. The coachee will define the actual issue, while the coach will use his or her skills to help deal with the issue.

Coaching Looks to the Future and Next Actions

Coachees are typically looking for some change to their performance, career, or life direction. Determining the right path may require the coachee to look at past experiences and decisions.

However, the most positive coaching experiences are sessions that conclude with an agreed set of next steps or actions to take.

Tip:

Good coaching sessions typically last between one and two hours. If they're less than an hour long, it's likely that the topic, or topics, won't be reviewed in sufficient detail. If a session lasts more than two hours, both the coach and coachee may lose focus and concentration.

Key Approaches Used in Coaching

These are useful approaches that you can use in coaching sessions:

Structured Questioning

Most coaching is achieved by asking the right questions – the types of questions that coachees would ask of themselves.

With practice and experience, you can develop a sense of what the right questions are. But as a simple rule, start with open questions, and then ask more specific and probing questions once the coachee has raised an issue or concern.

Active Listening

Pay attention to the fine detail of what coachees are saying, and how they're saying it. This is key to understanding a coachee's position at a deep enough level.

Is there a lot of emotion attached to the words that the coachee is using? If so, what emotion? Passion, fear, excitement, dread, anger, joy?

How does the coachee's body language compare with the words being spoken? We often use words lightly, but the underlying meaning may say a lot about what we feel or believe. For example, phrases starting with "I should do ..." or "I must do ..." are very different from phrases starting with "I will ..."

Summarizing and Repeating

During a coaching session, summarize where the coaching conversation, or part of the conversation, has led. This helps the coachee relax and continue, as they know that you have taken an interest, and see the whole picture.

You should also occasionally repeat what coachees say – particularly when it could help you understand how their behaviors or expressions might be seen by others.

Checking in With the Coachee

During a coaching session, it really helps to confirm with coachees that the session is going well for them and that it's covering what they want it to cover.

It's normal for coaches to give "homework assignments" to coachees. This does not mean the coaches are taking on the role of teacher. It simply means that both coach and coachee agree that some structured thinking time between coaching sessions is of value.

Tip:

Our article on the **GROW Model** will help you further when planning and structuring a coaching session.

Example Coaching Questions

A member of your team has asked you to help them improve her time management. You schedule in a coaching session with her, and ask these questions:

- Where are the key conflicts in your use of time?
- What usually stops you from leaving work at a regular time?
- How do you think you could address that problem and stop it from happening?
- What stops you from getting up an hour earlier to do X?

- What support do you have at home to do Y?
- How could you get more support at home for Y?
- How could you get more support at work for the regular tasks you perform?
- How do you feel about delegating at work and at home?
- What is the main priority for how you spend your time?
- How do you deal with distractions?

These are simple, open questions. But the answers to these and other similar questions will often show that the real issue behind a time management problem, for example, has nothing to do with time management – but rather, something to do with how the coachee feels. If you have an issue with time management, try answering some of the questions above. Substitute X for an activity you believe you want to do, but never seem to make time to do it. Substitute Y for a home or family task that you always have to do yourself.

External coaches often have to deal with a coachee's major life changes and more wide-ranging career considerations. When managers act as coaches, they should think about whether to coach on these topics, depending on whether there's a potential conflict of interest with the manager's regular organizational role.

Key Points

Coaching is great for helping people develop their skills and abilities, and for resolving issues before they become serious.

Coaching is useful in many different situations, and you can use coaching as part of your everyday role. Use the approaches we've discussed here, as well as tools such as the GROW model to help you structure your sessions.

Always remember to keep the coachee's interests at the forefront of coaching sessions. Also, try to let coachees come up with their own conclusions through open questions, rather than giving them the answers directly.