

Coaching for Behavioral Change

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As leaders we usually preach values involving people and teamwork, but sometimes excuse ourselves from their practice. Even more often, organizations fail to hold leaders accountable for living these values. This inconsistency invites corporate cynicism, undermines credibility, and can sap organizations of their vitality. The failure to uphold espoused values in general (and “people” values in particular) is one of the biggest frustrations in the workplace.

In our research, involving thousands of participants at more than 30 large companies, employees rated their manager’s ability to “effectively deal with individuals whose behavior undermines teamwork” dead last among 92 elements of effective leadership. When qualitative interviews were used to ask employees to describe the difference between “the values we preach” and “the values we live” stories of the corporation’s failure to deal with leaders who do not live the people values were the most common responses.

If everyone, including senior executives, acknowledges this challenge, why is it so difficult for leaders to promote change among those whose behavior they can most readily influence - their direct reports?

One reason is that leaders, like most people, want to be liked. Leaders are often afraid that confronting people about poor teamwork or other behavioral shortcomings (as opposed to performance problems) will cause them to be disliked. The paradox is, leaders would be more respected, not less, if they helped people change dysfunctional behavior. Outside consultants often provide behavioral coaching to leaders, and leaders usually appreciate the help. Surveys show that people highly value suggestions and strategies aimed at helping them improve.

The nature of the performance review process itself accounts for much of the problem. Historically, when assessing others, most managers were forced to play the role of judge - and, potentially, executioner. The consultant, by contrast, is usually seen as an objective third party who is providing analysis, suggestions, and feedback gathered from multiple sources. A person receiving bad news from a consultant is more likely to separate the message from the messenger than a person hearing the same news from the manager.

Fortunately, leaders have at their disposal a valuable aid already in feedback. Carefully designed^oplace at many leading companies - 360 feedback can allow a

leader to practice processes that include 360 consultative coaching, as opposed to merely exercising personal judgment. The results can be profound - and not just for the department heads evaluating their front-line employees. The executive coaching process can help any manager whose work involves personal interaction. In fact, senior management teams at many of the world's leading companies - American Express, GE, Johnson and Johnson, UBS - use 360 feedback as part of an overall process to help align corporate values and individual behavior.

Before You Begin

This article is going to describe a proven process for behavioral coaching. While this process can improve behavior, it will definitely not solve all performance problems. As a coach, you need to “qualify your customer”. You have a very limited amount of time. Only invest your time where you will get a good “return on investment”.

Before you get started, ask yourself if any of the following conditions prevail. If any of these conditions exist, behavioral coaching may be a waste of time.

- The person you're coaching is not willing to make a sincere effort to change. Behavioral coaching will only work if the manager you are coaching is willing to make the needed commitment.
- The person has been written-off by the company. Sometimes, organizations are really just documenting a case to get rid of someone. If that's the case, don't bother going through this process.
- The person lacks the intelligence or functional skills to do the job. If a manager does not have the capacity or experience required, don't expect behavioral coaching to help. This process won't turn a bad engineer into a good engineer!
- The person has the wrong mission. Coaching is a “how to get there” process, not a “where to go” process. If the people that are being coached are headed in the wrong direction, behavioral coaching will only help them get there faster!
- The person commits an ethics or integrity violation. Issues involving ethics or integrity should generally be treated as “conditions of employment” not “performance management”. In most cases the best thing to do when people violate guidelines of ethics is to fire them as soon as possible. Behavioral coaching should not be used as a tool when integrity is violated.

Getting Started

On the other hand, if you're dealing with people who have the sincere motivation to change their behavior, are operating in an environment that gives them a chance to change, and work for an organization that is headed in the right direction, this

process will work; the nature of the process itself assures its success. The approach I recommend involves eight steps:

1. Involve the person you are coaching in identifying desired attributes for a person in his/her role. You shouldn't have to start from scratch. I generally work with my clients to develop custom leadership profiles, but there are many useful inventories on the market (from Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner, the Center for Creative Leadership, AssessmentPlus and others) that can be a big help. Once you have a general idea of the behavioral characteristics of a successful person in a given position - such things as accessibility to colleagues, recognition of others, listening-ask that person if he or she agrees that these are the right kind of behaviors. Involving the person being coached will boost commitment to the process.

2. Involve the person you are coaching in determining who can provide meaningful feedback. Key stakeholders may include direct reports, peers, customers, suppliers, or members of the management team. Strive for a balanced mix that does not "stack the deck" for or against the person being coached, and gain agreement that these are the appropriate reviewers. There are two major reasons that successful people deny the validity of behavioral feedback: a) wrong behaviors or b) wrong raters. It is very hard for people to deny the validity of behavioral feedback when they are involved in determining key behaviors and in choosing key stakeholders!

3. Collect feedback. Assessment is often best handled in a written, anonymous survey, compiled by an outside party into a summary report and given directly to the person being coached. If this is impractical a more informal stakeholder involvement process that merely requires "asking for suggestions for the future" may work. The key is to collect feedback in a manner that the person being coached can accept.

4. Analyze results. Talk with the person about the results of his or her colleagues' feedback. The person may choose not to disclose individual stakeholders' comments, or numerical scores. The point is simply to discuss key strengths and 1-2 areas for improvement. Focus on the items that are going to make the biggest difference for the business; these may not be the items that have the highest stakeholder dissatisfaction. Remember, leadership is not a popularity context. Successful people tend to over-commit. Try to keep the process simple enough for an extremely busy person to successfully implement. Help your coaching client focus on the behavioral change that will make the biggest difference.

5. Develop an action plan. The most helpful-and appreciated-outcome of any assessment is specific advice. Developing "alternatives to consider" (rather than mandates) shouldn't be difficult. If, for example, you asked the manager to suggest four things you could do to be a better listener, you'd probably get a pretty good list-things like: Don't interrupt people. Paraphrase what they say. Make eye contact. Pause five seconds before responding to their remarks. The problem isn't figuring

out what to do; the problem is doing it. Focus on helping your coaching client select one or two key behaviors and develop a few action steps to improve each.

6. Have the person respond to stakeholders. The person being reviewed should talk with each key stakeholder and collect additional suggestions on how to improve on the key areas targeted for improvement. In responding, the person being coached should keep the conversation positive, simple and focused. When mistakes have been made in the past, it is generally a good idea to apologize and ask for help in changing the future. Suggest that your client listen to stakeholder suggestions and not judge the suggestions.

7. Develop an ongoing follow-up process. Ongoing follow-up should be very efficient and focused. Questions like, “Based upon my behavior last month, what ideas do you have for me next month?” can keep a focus on the future. Within six months conduct a two-to-six item mini-survey with key stakeholders. They should be asked whether the person has become more or less effective in the areas targeted for improvement.

8. Review results and start again. If the person being coached has taken the process seriously, stakeholders almost invariably report improvement. Build on that success by repeating the process for the next 12 to 18 months. This type of follow-up will assure continued progress on initial goals and uncover additional areas for improvement. Stakeholders will appreciate the follow-up. No one minds filling out a focused, two-to-six-item questionnaire if they see positive results. The person being coached will benefit from ongoing, targeted steps to improve performance.

Moving Beyond the Basics

You may want some coaching yourself from a trusted colleague, friend, or family member on how to approach the task, but this is not a mysterious process. It requires more discipline than talent, more integrity and commitment than behavioral science expertise. Simply by sitting down with the person you are coaching and analyzing the perceptions of his or her colleagues, you will be able to change your relationship with that person. And the person will change too. People who want to improve, talk to people about ways to improve, solicit feedback, and develop a rigorous follow-up plan will almost always improve. (Certainly they won't get worse.) And when people improve, their self-confidence goes up. They keep doing what works, and they keep getting better.

By becoming an effective coach, you can become a more credible leader and an active agent of change. You help people develop an essential habit for personal or organizational success-follow through. By delivering what you promise-that is, measuring others on the behaviors and attributes you say you value- you cement the bonds of leadership with your constituents. And by having others follow through on their own progress toward agreed goals, you can help create a more responsive, positive, and cohesive organization.

It may be difficult for leaders to give and receive honest feedback-and to make the time for genuine dialogue. Behavioral coaching is simple, but not easy. It is just one tool in a total strategy of performance appraisal, compensation, and promotion that can reinforce positive behavioral change. But if you're serious about your espoused values, shouldn't you ensure that the professionals in your organization demonstrate the values you promote?

Goldsmith's What Got You Here Won't Get You There is the Harold Longman Award Business Book of the Year for 2007. All of his articles and videos online are complimentary at www.MarshallGoldsmithLibrary.com.