HARVARD MANAGEMENT COMMUNICATION LETTER

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How to Coach Your Employees

by Martha Craumer

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How to Coach Your Employees

Focus on their strengths, not their weaknesses.

STARTING TOMORROW, you'll be heading the financial services development team. You're charged with creating a constant stream of clever new variations on well-established products that have a long, successful track record of sales with the public. You know the team already, and most of them are the kind of people you want—smart, creative, flexible, high-energy.

The guy who's been on the team the longest, Frank, is a different story. He's everybody's favorite—probably because opposites attract. He doesn't seem to have a creative bone in his body. Frank's typical response to every new idea the rest of the team throws at him is to question whether or not the public really needs "another way to buy something that's been fine for 50 years." But he's conscientious to a fault, and the team relies on him to provide the research and the background reports that always seem to take more time than anyone else has to give them.

Just before you started your new role, the company instituted a new evaluation and bonus process that will reward your team on the number of new product ideas it can bring to market, and there's no question that Frank will drag the team down. If you can't find a way to use Frank productively, the rest of the team will resent him. How can you turn Frank into a creative powerhouse? He's already beginning to show signs of defensiveness—he knows the new evaluation scheme will eventually nail him.

This is not a problem you can manage Frank out of. Frank's weakness is his lack of creativity. And you can't just push uncreative people to be more creative. However, you might be able to coach him into greater productivity—or a different role on the team.

New insights gleaned from the rapid expansion of executive coaching over the past half-decade have practical implications for today's managers. Let's see what advice we can get from the experts that could be applied to Frank.

Managerial coaching is about getting the most out of your people by showing them that you respect and value them. "Good coaching avoids manipulation and coercion," explains Stan Hustad, performance coach and leader of the PTM Group (Minneapolis, Minn). "Coaching asks what is *right* as well as what works."

Build mutual trust and mutual respect. According to James Flaherty, executive coach and author of *Coaching: Evoking Excellence in Others,* the successful coaching relationship has three interdependent elements: trust, respect, and freedom of expression. To get there, make sure your actions are consistent with your words. Don't tell others what your people have shared with you in confidence. Follow through on your promises and commitments. Be honest, objective, and fair. And remember, you don't have to "like" a person to build a mutually trusting and respectful relationship with them.

Ask permission to coach. Never mind that you're the boss. Show consideration and respect for your people by asking their permission to give them feedback. This can be as simple as saying, "May I offer a couple of suggestions?" or "Would you be open to taking a different approach to that problem?" By approaching your employees in this way, you're offering to share your power and control with them, in effect. And this, in turn, minimizes the likelihood of a defensive response.

Rethink performance goals. In the typical performance review, managers highlight areas of "weakness" that employees should try to improve. The goal is a "well-rounded" employee. In her new book, *Drive Your People Wild Without Driving Them Crazy,* Jennifer White explains, "You took their strengths, the skills they could have used to make a real impact, tossed them aside and had them focus their attention on getting better at their weaknesses. What you created was a dull group of people who look and act like everyone else.... No wonder you can't make real inroads on creativity or innovation with your team." A far better approach may be to overlook weaknesses and instead encourage and develop what your people do well naturally. White suggests that coaches look for areas in which their people can be superstars and present them with opportunities to really make a difference. A good coach looks for ways to leverage the strengths of his or her people. Should you really care that someone has a messy desk or is disorganized or introverted if that person is performing brilliantly in a critical area?

View "weaknesses" as strengths. Instead of seeing the shortcomings of your people as something to be corrected, try viewing them as the flip side of strengths. What you see as "wimpiness," for instance, may actually be a heightened sensitivity to others—and could be very valuable in sales, customer service, or consulting.

Don't leave your objectivity behind. Careful observation and assessment are critical to effective—and fair—coaching. Feedback should be linked to specific examples, not vague or general impressions. Flaherty suggests that coaches ask themselves the following, "Is the assessment based upon observations that can be made by any competent observer, and is the coach able to cite particular instances of the observation?" Before jumping to solutions, make sure that you've seen enough to draw an accurate conclusion. If necessary, check your assessment with other trusted colleagues.

Be fully present. In any coaching situation—whether it's an informal encounter or a formal performance review—focus all of your attention on the other person. Notes Hustad, "Many managers are so

used to multi-tasking and juggling projects that they're often unaware of just how distracted and fragmented their personal presence really is." Don't shuffle through papers, read your mail, think about your golf game or what you'll have for lunch. Look at the person, not your computer screen. And listen actively, noting not just the words but the emotions behind them and the unspoken messages.

Build self-management skills in your people. Besides trying to enhance performance, good coaches nurture the self-perception and growth of their people. The goal here is to develop in each person the capacity for self-awareness and self-knowledge that over time leads to self-correction. Explains Flaherty, "Well-coached clients can observe when they are performing well and when they are not and will make any necessary adjustments independently of the coach." In other words, the best coaches aim to make themselves unnecessary and obsolete.

Great coaches know that if they focus on getting the most out of their people, the bottom line will take care of itself. Why? Because people who feel valued and respected stick around, rewarding you with love, loyalty, and hard work. They're willing to go the extra mile because you've taken the time to help them get more out of work—and life. "Be the coach who tells them you believe in them," says White. "Then step back and watch what happens."

So what can you do with Frank? First you have to gain his permission to enter into a coaching relationship, and then you have to build trust. So begin by looking for the coachable moments. He's probably feeling embattled; he already knows he's not as creative as the others. The direct approach may be the best. Catch him after one of those not-so-successful brainstorming sessions. Don't confront him immediately after he grants you his permission—instead, tell him you'll be looking for opportunities in the days ahead when the two of you can talk productively, when events are fresh in your minds.

Then, build some trust by starting with his strengths. He's a great researcher and makes a good devil's advocate. Perhaps you could take one of his devilish comments—which the rest of the group experiences as a roadblock to creativity—and use it to launch the group into a new round of brainstorming. ("Wait—Frank's concerns about legal impediments make sense. How could we address those and still generate all those new options? Frank, in the meantime, could you generate a history of legal decisions that relate to this area of consumer behavior?")

Or perhaps you could put Frank's two strengths together and have him provide the rest of the team with historical evidence of successes and failures in each new area of product development. That effort could help the other team members focus on the most promising niches and allow them to be more productive. ("Frank, I hear what you're saying about online options never succeeding with that demographic. Historically, what services have succeeded?") This way Frank will become creative without even being aware of it.

Redefine his role as the team historian, and you might even be able to get his productivity measured along different lines. Get him to research and write his reports throughout the product development process and across all the various

Coaching Skills

To get the most out of your coaching sessions, brush up on these key skills:

Preparation—Don't wing it, even if your coaching session is informal. At the very least, go over in your head what the issues are, how you'll approach your team member, questions you'll ask, and follow-up actions to suggest. Every coaching interaction is an opportunity—don't leave the outcome to chance.

Observation and assessment—Observe how your people work and interact with others. What impact are they having on other members of the team or on overall goals and objectives? Avoid being judgmental or making assumptions and look for ways to test and confirm your observations.

Questioning—Open questions encourage participation and the sharing of ideas. Questions like "What would happen if…" help your people to explore options and see things from other perspectives. Closed questions—those that require a yes, no, or other short answer—confirm understanding and focus responses.

Listening—Good listening encourages open, honest communication. Put your work aside and focus on the person in front of you. Try to create a relaxed, accepting atmosphere and avoid interrupting or speeding the conversation along. Watch for nonverbal cues and body language that can help you read between the lines.

Feedback—As noted above, ask for permission before giving feedback. Something as simple as "May I offer a suggestion?" shows that you respect the person and their feelings. When giving feedback, make it objective and descriptive. Focus on specific behaviors and their consequences—never make it personal. And be sure to recognize and comment on positive behaviors and accomplishments, not just the negatives.

Follow-up—Coaching is most effective when there's a shared commitment on the part of both parties. Work together to agree on an action plan and schedule a follow-up meeting to evaluate progress. Hustad suggests using questions like "How are we going to begin?", "When will that be completed?", and "May I hold you responsible for…?" Make it clear that you'll be available to provide support or answer questions—then make sure that you are.

team efforts. That way, the rest of the team can focus on being creative. And, at the very least, within the team it will be clear that what he's doing does add to the overall team effort.

Finally, look for ways to get Frank to monitor his own behavior. If you make him responsible for only playing devil's advocate once initial brainstorming is completed, for example, he will begin to see his role in the team as less adversarial and more productive. ❑

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FURTHER READING

Coaching: Evoking Excellence in Others
by James Flaherty
1999 • Butterworth-Heinemann

Drive Your People Wild Without Driving Them Crazy
by Jennifer White
2001 • Capstone Publishing