

Coaching – just another flavor of the month?

A promotion into management usually is a result of our technical expertise and our strong sense of responsibility that has led us to get the job done. The very aptitudes which got us there often cause us to fail as managers. That same sense of responsibility and our technical skills results in micromanaging and leaves us working long hours to get the job done. Our left over culture from the 'command and control era' leaves us as managers feeling like we will always have the answer and will take charge and "tell" our staff what to do. This effectively eliminates their responsibility, reducing them to children who need to wait for 'daddy or mommy' to tell them what to do. Relying on you for everything may mean that they never risk being wrong but it also reduces their confidence, and stifles their resilience, creativity and resourcefulness. It inhibits the ability of individuals to respond quickly to change.

Many organizations are undergoing efforts to become "employers of choice;" employers that can draw and keep the best, the brightest and the most adaptable knowledge workers. There is a strategic reason for this push as well: to create an environment in which employees will anticipate environmental changes, see opportunities and create services to meet emerging demands. Creating this environment is more than simply a matter of having sharp talent; it is also a matter of creating a climate in which strategic thinking and strategic conversations are encouraged and supported.

One tool that actively encourages the thoughtfulness and ownership needed for adaptability is coaching. Coaching takes many forms; here we mean conversations that managers have to assist their employees to better take responsibility for and resolve their own and organizational problems.

"ATB Financial has invested heavily in coaching. Gaynor Levisky, Director of Leadership, says when their leaders are having open and honest conversations the company experiences a triple win - satisfied customers, engaged associates, and a healthy return to our shareholder."

Corporations are looking for more engagement (a higher level of commitment from their people). Commitment according to management expert Dennis Kinlaw comes from providing your employees with greater clarity, enhancing their competence, providing opportunities for them to influence their role and taking time to appreciate them both as human beings and for their effort.

Coaching is defined as conversations devoted to helping others clarify problems and/or goals generate solutions/plans, act and evaluate. The adage "teach to fish" rather than "give a fish" captures some of the essence. But coaching can go even further, because you can help your employees decide "is fishing for me?" and "do I like fish?" All of which builds Kinlaw's 4 pillars.

Helping(as apposed to cajoling, manipulating, forcing, coercing)...the employee is the aim of all coaching conversations!

Where there isn't any trust one conversation won't create it. We have experienced situations where employees had not had any real contact from their superiors for over two years:

- Annual Performance Reviews were handled as a perfunctory paper task – fill in the form, “do you agree?” “okay”, “anything to add?” “no”, “okay.” “Done.”

- Managers learning to coach said, “I talk to my people almost daily, the conversation goes, ‘Hi, how are you?’, ‘Fine’, ‘Great’, ‘how’s the job going?’, ‘OK’, ‘Good that’s what I like to hear. Have a good one’.”

Was anybody talking? Was anybody listening?

Many managers respond, “I have no time to talk to my people. I have 29 reports and I am swamped with tasks and dealing with their problems.” It is hard to change that kind of thinking realize that what you did burn your time up on that day was accepting the resignation of a staff member, dealing with a safety infraction which caused an accident (fortunately not too serious, but still...) and handling an employee conflict situation that had burst into flame. All events that may not have occurred if the manager had been having ongoing relevant conversations with his people. Carving out the time to talk to your people while you are still fire fighting is tough but once you begin the pay off in time saved becomes evident.

Lindsay McCracken, BC Hydro Field Services noted that 100 % of their managers that are now coaching, using the 5 coaching conversations in Everyday Coaching have reduced their stress and increased their productivity within 8 weeks. “These are results that will eventually impact our bottom line. We started training our managers on how to coach in order to help them increase performance. Morale has gone up, managers are not taking on so many problems and they are more focused on their own priorities. Coaching works.”