

Are You a Trainer or a Coach?

Managers tend to be trainers, while leaders know how to coach their people. Training is a one-time event that tells people what to do, which leaves employees sometimes feeling dictated to. Coaching is a process that is continuous and consistent. Additionally, we explain to our employees why they need to change or why this behavior change request is better for them or the organization. Coaching is a softer and kinder form of communicating with employees that inspires and motivates positive change.

Coaching is about deepening an employee's learning and forwarding the actions he or she is trying to achieve. When employees come to us with questions or problems, we should ask them to try to solve them for themselves and come to us with recommendations, but most managers don't do that. Managers tend to give them the answers because they think it will save time. Managers know that it might take ten or fifteen minutes to stop work and show them how to find the answer for themselves or coach them. Answering the question or giving them the answer only takes a few seconds so managers fool themselves into thinking that giving them answers is the best thing for everyone involved. Unfortunately, this is a tremendous disservice to employees because they are robbed of learning how to think for themselves. They are also robbed of the gratification of coming up with answers themselves, which is very unfair.

Being a great coach is not about having all the right answers, it's about having the right questions. It's like walking through a park. You're side by side with an employee and you come to a "Y" in the path but you don't tell him or her which way to go, you ask the right questions in order to help *the employee* determine the best path to take. That's like the old saying, "If you give them a fish you can feed them for a day, but if you teach them how to fish you can feed them for a lifetime."

Coaching dialogue is completely different than managing dialogue. As an example, a "manager" type of dialogue would be the following scenario: The manager observes an employee handling an angry customer in a negative way. The manager might say something like, "I observed your interaction with that customer and he walked away unhappy. What did you do to him?" Once the employee explains what happened, the manager might say, "I don't ever want you to do that again. So the next time, either treat customers better or come get me and I'll handle it." That's the way a manager might handle the situation.

A leader who wants to coach the employee might say, "I observed your interaction with that customer and was left with the perception that he walked

away unhappy. How did you feel about the interaction?” The leader will let the employee talk through it and deepen his or her learning about the experience. Then the leader might say, “If you could back up time and do it all over again, what might you do differently to make a more positive outcome for everybody?” Once again, the leader will give the employee a lot of time to think through it and then listen to the employee’s recommendations. The leader would then acknowledge the employee for thinking through the situation properly and coming up with new ideas on how to handle it.

If the leader would like to contribute some additional ideas to make it easier for the employee to handle the situation better next time or to enhance the customer’s experience even more, the leader might make suggestions to the employee using the following dialogue: “May I offer you some additional thoughts on how we might exceed the customer’s expectations in that situation?” Then the leader will wait for the employee to say “Yes,” because now he or she has been invited into the employee’s world. The employee shouldn’t feel dictated to when the leader simply said, “May I offer you?” and the employee replies, “Yes.”

So coaching is really a softer form of communication that helps develop far better employees and reduces anxiety between employees and their supervisors.