If you really want a winning work team, says Sandra Mobley, then Phil Jackson should overrule Judge Wapner.

Judge Not: How Coaches Create Healthy Organizations

Sandra A. Mobley

A few years ago there was much talk about the need for managers to become leaders. Now the business literature is telling managers that they should become coaches. If I didn't know better, I'd think all the analysts and management theorists were out to frustrate managers. As soon as they've learned one skill, they're told that another skill—completely different and new to them—is really what they need to manage.

The truth is, as our workplaces change, many skills are needed, and the latest thinking has focused on a set of skills that often come into play when the leadership and coaching worlds intersect. There are many good reasons why managers should work to improve their ability to coach—and a few organizational obstacles that must be overcome if they are to succeed.

Off the defensive

The typical boss-as-God working environment puts employees on the defensive because they live in constant fear of being judged. A judging relationship causes employees to hide their mistakes, defend their behavior, and refuse to ask for help or admit their weaknesses or vulnerabilities. When a defendant admits to making a mistake in court, Judge Wapner doesn't explore the defendant's goals, nor does he care about what he has learned in this situation. He sentences the defendant and makes that person pay for his or her mistakes. It's not surprising that a working atmosphere characterized by a judging mentality also features low morale, high absenteeism, and little teamwork.

On the other hand, a coaching atmosphere creates trust and builds support. Coaching is the opposite of judging. A coaching relationship helps people work out issues and find their own answers through the skillful use of probing questions. Coaches help employees recognize their strengths and uncover their blind spots; they can offer additional possibilities and options that employees had not considered in evaluating their situations. A great coach helps you do your best work. Michael Jordan realized that when he said he wouldn't play for any coach except Phil Jackson.

Impediments to coaching

For managers who have been trained to have the answers, point out weaknesses, and solve problems, coaching is often an unnatural act. Furthermore, a coaching relationship goes against the grain of many traditional management structures and concepts.

It's not hard to see why managers find it difficult to reconcile their coaching and managing duties. Even as companies encourage managers to become coaches, few have defined exactly what they want their managers to do as coaches. Fewer still are providing training and skill building in coaching, and it's virtually unheard of for companies to relieve managers of other tasks while adding the coaching imperative. Furthermore, most managers continue to be validated and rewarded for their success in task-related activities, not for their coaching activities.

Look at the way salary decisions are typically made. When it comes to raises, organizations expect managers to evaluate their employees' performance. Coaching puts managers in a double bind: while they should focus on their employees' strengths and let them stumble on their way to solving problems, the organization wants managers to focus on weaknesses and mistakes of employees so they can determine how to adjust salaries.

While assessing what their employees have accomplished, managers often feel they aren't doing their jobs unless they point out the dreaded "areas for improvement." Yet a coaching relationship means allowing employees to make mistakes and learn from them.

As competition increases and business environments change, organizations need employees who are willing to learn. To do this, employees must be willing—and allowed—to make mistakes. Fear of being punished for making mistakes will cause employees to play it safe. While playing it safe may sound reasonable, consider how it can affect customer service.

All too frequently an employee who is asked by a customer for something out of the ordinary would rather say it can't be done—either because it isn't allowed by the policy, or it isn't his or her job. The unwillingness to take risks—the desire to play it safe—makes perfect sense, given that the employee is in a punitive environment. Even if an employee spots a problem, he or she knows the cost of trying to fix it, and failing is far greater than simply leaving the problem alone.

In my 15 years as a manager, consultant, and coach, I have found that people are far more aware of their weaknesses than their strengths. In fact, they seem to take their strengths for granted and minimize rather than capitalize on them.

Recently, a client who is brilliant at strategic thinking and sales—but only fair at people management and administration—was feeling overwhelmed by the myriad details and personnel problems he had to solve. As a result, he had little energy for marketing and developing the company's long-term strategy—which is what he does best. After coaching, he decided to hire a chief operating officer with strong administrative and people skills, which allowed him to play up his strengths and ultimately made the company healthier.

While successful people are aware of their weaknesses and take steps to minimize their impact, they do not go overboard in trying to overcome them, but they seek positions that spotlight what they do well. Recall your educational experiences. Finding that art or math is not a strength can be feedback instead of failure; and that feedback can be used to make choices about what you ultimately should do in life.

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Making coaching work

For some managers, adding coaching to an already lengthy list of responsibilities can feel like the straw that breaks the camel's back. But I suspect many managers are already developing coaching relationships and having coaching conversations with their employees. By learning ways to coach more skillfully, these coaching sessions can be more effective and feel less burdensome. And as employees develop their abilities, they become more self-motivated and self-managing. The following techniques can make a world of difference in your effectiveness as a coach:

1) Create a context where you are prepared to coach and the employee is open to coaching. The things you say and do to set the stage are important here. First, let the person know that the purpose of the coaching relationship is to support his or her overall development and effectiveness. If you are only willing to coach someone to be more effective in his or her current position, make that clear. If you are willing to explore opportunities outside of those boundaries, state that as well.

In creating the right context, make sure the environment is conducive to coaching. When you are interrupted during a coaching session, either by people walking in or the telephone, it is hard to maintain your focus and build rapport with your employee.

When you allow interruptions, you communicate a subtle message that the employee is not worthy of your full attention.

Personally, I get distracted by papers on my desk, so I make sure to clear them away prior to a coaching session. Do whatever you need to do to be fully present with an employee.

2) Use reflective listening by hearing the words and reading the emotional content. It is a wonderful gift to have someone give you his or her full attention. It can also be helpful to have someone reflect back to you what he or she heard and felt while listening to you. We sometimes are unaware of our anger or pain about a situation because we have buried the feelings. When the feelings are noticed and reflected back, we have a greater awareness of ourselves.

By fully listening to employees without interrupting or problem solving, you set the stage that allows them to find their own answers. Your interruptions, no matter how well-intentioned, take the floor away from an employee and put the focus back on you. When you are certain that the employee has completed his or her thought, then reflect back what you heard and observed.

3) Ask questions that help to open new possibilities, explore perceptions and assumptions, and provide new ways of evaluating the same data. The key to this skill is that you must be genuinely curious and not make the employee feel as though he or she is being judged, interrogated, or manipulated. When your questions respect the employee's thought process, you support his or her own questioning of long-held assumptions. It is much harder to ask skillful questions than to give advice. And, for many years, managers have received positive feedback for having the answers and giving advice. But our answers work for us. The goal is for the employee to find the answer that works best for him or her.

A beginning coach, for example, was discussing how to hold people accountable with the manager of a consulting department. The coach made several suggestions—using the performance appraisal and instituting a bonus with stretch goals. None of these suggestions worked because the manager was uncomfortable holding people accountable; the issue was not learning the skill of how to do it, but having the *will* to do it.

4) Give useful feedback. As mentioned earlier, managers may feel compelled to give "constructive" rather than positive feedback. If constructive feedback is needed, the best approach is to ask the employee what he or she thinks should be worked on. In the majority of situations, the employee is very aware of his or her shortcomings. When those areas are enumerated by the employee, you can suggest working on the one or two you think would be most beneficial to improve upon. This keeps you in the realm of coaching, not judging.

We spend most of our waking hours at work. Think about when you have done your best work: was it in a fearful and hostile environment or one that was supportive and playful? So forget about judging, and start coaching.

The value of coaching

In *The Loyalty Effect: The Hidden Force Behind Growth, Profits, and Lasting Value* (Harvard Business School Press, 1996), author Frederick F. Reichheld points out that employee retention leads to customer retention. Author and Stanford University professor Jeffrey Pfeffer further builds the business case in *The Human Equation: Building Profits by Putting People First* (Harvard Business School Press, 1998). Pfeffer quantitatively documents that organizations that put people first consistently have higher earnings than those that do not. His research uncovered seven practices of successful companies:

- **Employment security.**
- **Selective hiring** of new personnel.
- **Self-managed teams and decentralization of decision making** as the basic principles of organizational design.
- **Comparatively high compensation** contingent on organizational performance.
- **Extensive training**.
- **Reduced status distinctions and barriers**, including dress, language, office arrangements, and wage differences across levels.
- **Extensive sharing of financial and performance information** throughout the organization.

Pfeffer also notes that leaders who successfully put these practices in place sometimes have to buck conventional wisdom and trends, forsake short-term profitability for long-term results, and give up power and perks to create employee loyalty and ownership. Obviously, a self-directed, empowered workforce can no longer be managed in traditional, hierarchical ways. Developing such a workforce requires leaders who can coach and learn and are willing to lead by example. They can best support and nurture their employees by focusing on their strengths.

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