



Coach! The Skill Every Leader Needs

**It's a crucial ability and one you can learn.
Start by avoiding these common mistakes.**

By Andrew Neitlich

Every great leader is also a coach, helping others in the organization solve problems, deal with challenges, and improve results. People who receive coaching are more loyal to the organization, develop stronger relationships, improve teamwork, and increase productivity. Creating a culture of coaching in your organization will lead to more engaged employees and a more effective organization.

The essence of coaching is to work in partnership with your employees – including your volunteers – to help them come up with ideas to address the issues at hand. You work one-on-one with them, drawing out their thoughts and insights. The result: The employee discovers new ways of thinking about a problem, coming away with new approaches and action steps. As a coach, you're attentive and focused, reflecting back what you hear. The coach offers suggestions only as a last resort. In normal coaching conversations, the coach talks no more than 25% of the time.

In contrast, here are examples of what *not* to do.

“Sometimes silence is the best coaching strategy of all.”

Fixing

You're probably accustomed to stepping in and solving problems for people. When coaching, it can be tempting to just give the answer, but when you jump right into giving solutions, you aren't coaching. You could be advising, directing, teaching, or telling, but you aren't coaching.

The problem with fixing the problem is that just because you know the answer and would be able to implement it doesn't mean your employee can. The right solution for you might not be the right solution for the employee. Coaching lets you explore the best answer given where people are right now with their own unique talents, styles, and experiences.

Don't fix. Coach.

Knowing the answer and manipulating

If you know the answer, don't torture people into figuring it out by asking a series of Socratic questions. That's not coaching. At best, it's teaching the way they do in law school. At worst, it's manipulation – an attempt to get someone to come up with what you consider the “right” answer. From the employee's point of view, it can feel condescending, tedious, inauthentic, and a waste of time.

Coaching is for situations when you and the employee jump into the unknown and figure out the best answer together. If you already know what you want employees to do, then it's time for telling, not coaching.

Interrupting

Don't interrupt when you coach. This deceptively simple rule can be hard for coaches who process information quickly, but it's essential for effective coaching. If you interrupt, you might cut off employees just when they're about to say something crucial.

Get comfortable with silence. Wait a beat or two to be sure your employee has finished speaking. Sometimes silence is the best coaching strategy of all because it encourages people to think more deeply about an issue and go beyond the usual.

Being distracted

If you're in a noisy place, have crises to handle, are checking texts or e-mail, you're not in a position to coach. Coaching requires focus. Also, your employees deserve your attention.

Stacking questions

Without realizing it, you may be "stacking" questions – asking more than one question at a time. For instance: "Tell me about the people involved in this issue. What do you see as the main ways to resolve it? What will your action steps be?" Few people are able to consider so many questions at once.

Be patient. Ask a question, then pause and listen before asking something else. You'll get more thoughtful answers. Also, you may find that the next logical question is different from the one you'd planned to ask.

Checklist coaching

Checklist coaching means that you already have a list of questions to ask. There's no room for creativity or flexibility. Sometimes coaches don't even seem to be listening. They ask one question, maybe grunt acknowledgment, and then move to the next. The other person doesn't feel heard. The coach is more like a journalist conducting an interview than a coach.

Instead, let the coaching process unfold naturally. Ask questions based on what you hear your employee tell you. If your employee doesn't seem to know what to say, you might introduce a different line of inquiry to ignite new ideas, but avoid rote, checklist-based coaching.

Using a diagnostic approach

The diagnostic approach sounds like this: "Have you tried A? Have you tried B? Have you tried C? Have you tried D?"

“Help employees be more effective so they can do the work without you.”

This isn't good coaching. Good coaches ask open-ended questions and let others come up with their own ideas.

Never-ending, open-ended questioning

On the other hand, some coaches insist on *only* asking open-ended questions and *never* offering advice when they're coaching. As a result, their coaching feels more like therapy. It also becomes frustrating.

A balance exists between, on one hand, jumping to solutions and, on the other hand, not offering observations or insights at all. It's perfectly acceptable to give advice. Just be sure you wait till you've explored ideas from the employee's point of view before you share your perceptions.

Hiding suggestions

Some coaches hide their ideas in the form of a question, thinking that asking any type of question is good coaching. For instance: "What about trying X?" "Do you think Y is a good idea?" "Do you plan to do more research on Z?"

Coaches are less directive. They ask questions that let others lead the process. For instance: "What are your ideas to meet this challenge?" "Why do you think this happened?" "What might you try next?"

Remember: Coaching isn't about stepping in and doing someone else's work. It's about helping employees be more effective so that they can do the work without you. 

Andrew Neitlich is the founder and director of the Center for Executive Coaching, a leading coach training organization based in Central Florida. His book Coach! The Crucial, Deceptively Simple Leadership Skill for Breakaway Performance is available at centerforexecutivecoaching.com/book.

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