

One-on-One Coaching: The Most Effective Way to Develop Your People

Coaching is a proven way to motivate talented people. Here are the keys.

By Jeffrey W. Foley

The ability to coach people, one on one, is one of the most important skills you can possess. Effective coaching drives performance, builds competence, and enhances relationships. The best coaches help people find ways to make things happen.

How to Create a Coaching Environment

Here are three ways to forge the best environment for coaching:

1. Assure an open flow of communication.

To encourage an open line of communication, ask people these questions:

- What's on your mind?
- What can I do for you?
- What do you think?
- How am I making your life more difficult?

Ask these questions often. Ask them not just in the office but in the cafeteria, the breakroom, the hallway. Such chats can be wonderful enablers of communication, trust, and connection.

2. Agree on goals and strategies.

People want to know what success looks like. They want to be clear about how to reach their goals. Well-defined strategies help inspire people's commitment to be successful.

3. Enforce accountability by assessing performance.

When people aren't held accountable for performing to standards, morale evaporates. Integrity disappears. Discipline erodes. Leaders aren't taken seriously. Problem employees become a cancer in the organization. The best people leave. Results aren't achieved.

“Talk about mistakes so people can learn.”

“Ask these questions often.”

To be a good coach, you need to keep track of how people are doing. Assessing people's performance is the only way to achieve accountability. The secret is to hold consistent, regularly scheduled coaching sessions.

How to Hold a Coaching Session

There's no need to follow a set agenda. There are, however, a few topics you'll want to touch on.

The following provides an outline you can use to get started with your coaching sessions.

1. Discuss your protégé's goals.

Note how your protégé's goals align with the organization's goals. Clarify things your protégé can do to fulfill both individual and organizational goals.

2. Talk about what's going well.

Talk together about successes. Find ways to praise.

3. Discuss challenges and areas for improvement.

Your goal as a leader and coach is to inspire a willingness to succeed. That means you must root out behavior that impedes success and point out avenues toward improvement.


Talk about mistakes so people can learn. Gain a clear understanding of shortfalls in the individual's ability to achieve goals. Determine what resources or support the individual needs to be successful. See how you can help.

When someone's performance isn't up to par, address it. Leaders who never confront an underperformer are doing a disservice to their organization. All too often, good people serving in leadership positions fear the task of confrontation. They hope, magically, that something will happen to turn the underperformer around and all will be well. Hope is not a strategy; the magic seldom happens.

4. Seek input.

Ask how you can be a more effective leader. This question can change the dynamic of the coaching session and provide



powerful feedback for you. It will enhance people's trust in you and build their confidence in their own capabilities. It can be the catalyst that will energize people and lead them and your organization to unprecedented results. 

Jeff Foley (loralmountain.com) is a recognized speaker, executive leadership coach, and author of Rules and Tools for Leaders. He uses his singular insight to build better leaders.

Help People Be Their Best

Coaching is about bringing out people's greatest potential. For a variety of ways to do so, take a look at these articles (NonprofitWorld.org):

Be a Better Leader by Being a Careful Listener (Vol. 37, No. 1)

Grounded Visioning: A Quick Way to Create Shared Visions (Vol. 26, No. 4)

Overcome People's Resistance with These Steps (Vol. 38, No. 3)

Making Better Mistakes (Vol. 38, No. 4)

The Best Leaders Are Servant Communicators (Vol. 39, No. 4)

Why Feedback Is the Key to Your Success (Vol. 35, No. 3)

Coach! The Skill Every Leader Needs (Vol. 37, No. 1)

Do You Know Where Your Goals Are? (Vol. 26, No. 5)

A Path to Stronger Programs, Greater Engagement, and Less Burnout? (Vol. 36, No. 1)

How to Coach People through Stress: Use Reflective Inquiry for Best Results (Vol. 38, No. 4)

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