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You Can't Be a Great Manager If You're Not a Good Coach

by Monique Valcour

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You Can't Be a Great Manager If You're Not a Good Coach

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If you have room in your head for only one nugget of leadership wisdom, make it this one: the most powerfully motivating condition people experience at work is making progress at something that is personally meaningful. If your job involves leading others, the implications are clear: the most important thing you can do each day is to help your team members experience progress at meaningful work.

To do so, you must understand what drives each person, help build connections between each person's work and the organization's mission and strategic objectives, provide timely feedback, and help each person learn and grow on an ongoing basis. Regular communication around development — having *coaching conversations* — is essential. In fact, according to recent research, the single most important managerial competency that separates highly effective managers from average ones is coaching.

Strangely, at most companies, coaching isn't part of what managers are formally expected to do. Even though research makes it clear that employees and job candidates alike value learning and career development above most other aspects of a job, many managers don't see it as an important part of their role. Managers think they don't have the time to have these conversations, and many lack the skill. Yet 70% of employee learning and development happens on the job, not through formal training programs. So if line managers aren't supportive and actively involved, employee growth is stunted. So is engagement and retention.

Can you teach old-school, results-focused line managers to coach their employees? Absolutely. And the training boosts performance in both directions. It's a powerful experience to create a resonant

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connection with another person and help them to achieve something they care about and to become more of who they want to be. If there's anything an effective, resonant coaching conversation produces, it's positive energy. Hundreds of executive students have reported to me that helping others learn and grow is among the most rewarding experiences they've had as managers.

Starting today, you can be significantly more effective as a manager — and enjoy your job more — by engaging in regular coaching conversations with your team members. As you resolve to support their ongoing learning and development, here are five key tips to get you started.

Listen deeply. Consider what it feels like when you're trying to convey something important to a person who has many things on his mind. Contrast that familiar experience with the more luxurious and deeply validating one of communicating with someone who is completely focused on you and actively listening to what you have to say with an open mind and an open heart. You can open a coaching conversation with a question such as "How would you like to grow this month?" Your choice of words is less important than your intention to clear your mind, listen with your full attention, and create a high-quality connection that invites your team member to open up and to think creatively.

Ask, don't tell. As a manager, you have a high level of expertise that you're used to sharing, often in a directive manner. This is fine when you're clarifying action steps for a project you're leading or when people come to you asking for advice. But in a coaching conversation, it's essential to restrain your impulse to provide the answers. Your path is not your employee's path. Open-ended questions, not answers, are the tools of coaching. You succeed as a coach by helping your team members articulate their goals and challenges and find their own answers. This is how people clarify their priorities and devise strategies that resonate with what they care about most and that they will be committed to putting into action.

Create and sustain a developmental alliance. While your role as a coach is not to provide answers, supporting your team members' developmental goals and strategies is essential. Let's say that your employee mentions she'd like to develop a deeper understanding of how your end users experience the services your firm provides. In order to do so, she suggests accompanying an implementation team on a site visit next week, interviewing end users, and using the interviews to write an article on end user experience for publication on your firm's intranet-based blog. You agree that this would be valuable for both the employee and the firm. Now, make sure that you give your employee the authorization, space and resources necessary to carry out her developmental plan. In addition to supporting her, you can also highlight her article as an example of employee-directed learning and development. Follow-up is critical to build trust and to make your coaching more effective. The more you follow through on supporting your employees' developmental plans, the more productive your coaching becomes, the greater your employees' trust in you, and the more engaged you all become. It's a virtuous cycle.

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Focus on moving forward positively. Oftentimes in a coaching conversation, the person you're coaching will get caught up in detailing their frustrations. "I'd love to spend more time building my network, but I have no bandwidth. I'm at full capacity just trying to stay on task with my deliverables. I'd really love to get out to some industry seminars, but I can't let myself think about it until I can get ahead of these deadlines." While it can provide temporary relief to vent, it doesn't generate solutions. Take a moment to acknowledge your employee's frustrations, but then encourage her to think about how to move past them. You might ask, "Which of the activities you mention offer the greatest potential for building your knowledge and adding value to the company?" "Could you schedule two hours of time for developmental activities each week as a recurring appointment?" "Are there skills or relationships that would increase your ability to meet your primary deliverables?" "How could we work more efficiently within the team to free up and protect time for development?"

Build accountability. In addition to making sure you follow through on any commitments you make to employees in coaching conversations, it's also useful to build accountability for the employee's side of formulating and implementing developmental plans. Accountability increases the positive impact of coaching conversations and solidifies their rightful place as keys to organizational effectiveness. If your employee plans to research training programs that will fit his developmental goals, give these plans more weight by asking him to identify appropriate programs along with their costs and the amount of time he'll need away from work, and to deliver this information to you by a certain deadline. (And then, of course, you will need to act on the information in a timely manner.)

What will coaching your employees do for you? It will build stronger bonds between you and your team members, support them in taking ownership over their own learning, and help them develop the skills they need to perform and their peak. And it also feels good. At a coaching workshop I led last month in Shanghai, an executive said the coaching exercise he'd just participated in "felt like a bungee jump." As the workshop leader, I was delighted to observe that this man, who had arrived looking reserved and a bit tired, couldn't stop smiling for the rest of the evening. He was far from the only participant who was visibly energized by the coaching experience.

So go ahead and take the interpersonal jump. You will love the thrill of coaching conversations that catalyze your employees' growth.

Monique Valcour is an executive coach, keynote speaker, and management professor. She helps clients create and sustain fulfilling and high-performance jobs, careers, workplaces, and lives. Follow her on Twitter @moniquevalcour.

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