



Coaching Culture

An Epiphany of Perspective

BY GENE TIERNAN

One of the great joys of being a manager is developing talent.

It's an honorable pursuit to help reports, direct or indirect, discover their full potential and to be a mentor as each develops his or her career. There are few things more rewarding than having a former employee/mentee contact you after years have passed and learning that you were an inspiration along this person's path to professional satisfaction, growth, success, and perhaps even greatness.

At a time when businesses are running lean, the ability to develop employees has become more challenging. Hiring and/or developing individuals ahead of the curve is a rare luxury. Businesses tend to hire only when absolutely necessary, and then the employees need to make an immediate impact at full capacity. Of course, this outcome is a rarity. Depending on the role and the business cycle, it can take a good three, six, or even nine months for an associate to be fully up and running at a base level, learning the ropes and finding ways to add their own mark to how things are done.

As a result, most companies have fallen into the commonplace "you need to hit the ground running" requirement, and formal

check-in periods with management are more "check the box" exercises where a review is done quarterly, semiannually, and/or annually. As managers typically wear many hats, these reviews become tasks with imposed deadlines in a one-size-fits-all format, and in truth reflect a moment in time rather than a holistic assessment. Events that happened most recently are likely to be top of mind and thus what's being evaluated. This combination of numeric and/or qualitative assessment can run the risk of feeling critical, impersonal, and irrelevant, rather than insightful, holistic, and affirming.

A CHANGE IN PERSPECTIVE

I have spent a lot of time thinking about how I could be a better manager, and how coaching rather than criticizing has been more effective as I've fine-tuned my approach to managing teams. From a top-down HR policy perspective, formal reviews are typically a necessary evil, but I have changed my mindset from "performance review" to "career path advisement." When focusing on the individual, one



can understand strengths, weaknesses, and motivations looking forward, rather than criticizing and critiquing past performance to date.

I have had the good fortune throughout my career to serve as a business leader, a service provider, and a trainer, mostly in the marketing space and across multiple industries. Through these experiences, I've honed an approach that on its surface may be obvious, but it has played itself out as a sort of epiphany for me. For years I had managed individuals, teams, offices, and leadership in very traditional ways. Reviews had little impact on promotions and raises, but rather created more of a paper trail to address issues and ensure we'd had our eyes on associates and made efforts to develop each. Much of it was bureaucratic and from the top down, and all knew that.

It was when I played a role as a trainer that I was best able to see things more clearly. Teaching forced me to look at things differently, removing me from focusing internally to looking at the bigger picture from the periphery. This allowed me to break down processes and understand intentions so I could develop and apply some best practices that I adhere to today.

COACHING VS. FEEDBACK

Feedback is given at a point of time. It has a beginning, a

middle, and an end, ideally closely relevant to a situation. It establishes a judgment. This is not bad or without merit, but it is a response to some "thing."

Coaching is more of an ongoing pursuit, engaging associates thoughtfully and allowing them to assess and come to their own conclusions. Coaching offers a sideline view to be presented to associates while allowing them to respond with their own POV and perspective. Ideally this becomes a risk-free discourse over time so that the leader and associate come to an approach and a decision together.

I approach managing more as a marketing and service effort. As such, I see managing people more as "coaching" than "playing boss." I had a mentor who ran several successful businesses that lived by his words, "Hire good people, then step back and let them do their jobs." He would be on standby to coach as necessary and truly had an open-door policy, advising his reports to tell him the problem and the proposed solution so that he could share his perspective. More often than not, the associates could then wrestle any challenges to the ground on their own. Just like in sports, this "lead coach" can offer strategy and perspective to help the players move in a unified direction, performing as they see best from their perspectives on the field, empowered yet guided. This approach works. I've seen it firsthand, and I employ it even now.



THE SERVICE MINDSET: A FIRST LOOK

What is key is a service mindset. I'll get into this in more detail later, but at a glance, a coach's job is not to put people in a box, but rather to guide and inspire. When you put yourself in the mindset of treating teammates as clients rather than service providers, it is truly amazing to see how your perspective changes as their ambition grows.

As an account leader at a creative agency, I had the good fortune to have a "dream" client—a brand leader who recognized the value of an agency partner and wanted to do great things together. He explained that his company went to great efforts to build a first-rate agency roster, and my agency passed the test. He said, "You know, if you guys fail, it's probably my fault. You've been deemed the best of the best—if you are not successful, I am not successful. If things aren't great, I have to ask myself why—to blame the agency is a cop-out, since I approve all you do." I can't tell you how rare this perspective is, but I can tell you our team developed some of the best, most innovative and creative work of our careers. Pick up any trade magazine, and you'll see that agencies are fired daily. It's easy for a client or brand to blame the outsider, the agency. But when clients take ownership and get the best out of their team, we all succeed together.

A good leader, a good coach, can have that same perspective. Say to associates, "We hired you because we see how great you are. If you don't succeed, I must ask myself what I'm doing wrong, since I know your capability for success is endless." That mindset, internalized and consistently applied, will yield great work, I can assure you.

BUILD POSITIVITY

To use marketing as a metaphor, in the end positivity is the outcome we seek—positivity from several shared perspectives. Whether company, manager, or associate, we all want the same things: success, satisfaction, rewards, growth, and acknowledgement. These are not ends in and of themselves, but rather the means to an end—career contentment.

Positivity perpetuates. When a coach gets his or her entire team focused around positive outcomes, rather than simply the task at hand, the outcome becomes a greater motivator. This has a snowball effect, since positive outcomes make everyone want to get up and come to work to do great things, rather than just show up to do what needs to be done. With this comes inspiration, fulfillment, and better teamwork. A coach who inspires this positivity makes his or her own life easier—and once the coach gets the ball rolling, it picks up speed.

ALIGN EXPECTATIONS

Clarity is paramount. Coaches must be explicit in terms of what success looks like. Everyone must march to the same drum and understand how each person's role will yield that success. We see this everywhere in life; misunderstandings lead at least to disappointment and confusion, and at worst, to failure.

Expectations should not focus only on the little things, as important as they may be. We all know the devil is in the details, and so they are important, but if a coach sets up an environment that is more focused on completing tasks well and not on the bigger-picture reasons the tasks are being

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done in the first place, the team will necessarily fall into the trap of naval-gazing, as that’s the top-down expectation.

Individuals are more likely to be inspired by what they may accomplish, rather than just what they may do—even if they do it very well. A coach will be best served by keeping the team focused on the ultimate accomplishment, so the team has an eye toward how to build that better mousetrap, not just building the existing mousetrap at its best. The best coaches figure out how to get the best out of their people, so they change the game, not just play the game as it has always been played.

THE SERVICE MINDSET: A DEEP BRIEF

Let’s get back to approaching coaching as a service, rather than a top-down function. What a difference it is to look at an employee and strategically think, “What can I do to make this person great in service of our goals?” rather than “What do I need to tell this person to do so we meet our goals?” Based on my experience in the service industry, there is no question that creating a brief and getting all on board before any actions are taken is the best way to get folks aligned. The core elements are the same whether you’re kicking off a campaign, an innovation, or any other business goal, and they can be instrumental in setting expectations.

Objective. Have a clearly articulated statement of what you need to accomplish, not just what you need to do. It’s easy to allow oneself to be very busy doing things but accomplishing nothing. Clarity can help minimize this problem.

Strategy. Get each individual and team aligned on how you are going to get to your key accomplishment(s). The best outcomes occur when the coach can help the team and its individuals arrive at the “how,” so that each feels ownership and can pave a path toward that goal.

The single most important thing. There’s a lot of minutiae that can create chaos. Everything cannot be equal in importance. A coach must reduce the noise so the team and individuals know what’s most important. Only one thing can be most important; other things may be important too, but a coach must ensure that all are aware of the hierarchy of importance. That way, people won’t put great effort against doing rather than accomplishing.

Desired outcome/success metrics. A coach must clearly articulate what success will look like—again, not just what will get done, but what will be accomplished and how that affects the business. Metrics can be a bit definitive and are good to establish up-front where applicable. More often than

not, HR-implemented reporting will have metrics based on some criteria. But for a coach, it’s typically a bit “softer.” It’s more about relationship and personal development than numeric absolutes. If you can create metrics that make sense and don’t diminish the relationship, great. But if not, recognize the softer value of having more frequent 15-minute informal check-ins, 100% focused on that individual’s growth rather than task performance, and evaluate the person through more “human” considerations. Don’t diminish the value of relationship and personal growth to make something fit into a number rating.

Desired response. From the associate’s perspective, describe how you want them to respond to the experience of working with you. What do you want them to feel? What do you want them to think? What do you want them to do? Stating it in the first person allows you to put yourself in that associate’s shoes. Would you rather hear, “I got my job done well and did everything I was asked to do, so everyone should be happy with my performance,” or “I’ve come a long way thanks to my manager’s help in XYZ ways. I feel great—I never dreamed we’d accomplish what we did. I love working here and can’t wait to do something great again”?

Positivity. In the end, each individual and team should feel positive about what they’ve done; if they don’t, then the coach needs to reevaluate. The best people on a team are those who feel invested and good about the business and themselves. If the feeling is one of negativity, or even neutral, then the team is uninspired and the work will be too.

RELATIONSHIP RESET

Being a great coach is not “one and done.” The successful coach doesn’t give a pep talk before a game and then stand in the shadows. It’s an ongoing process that requires listening and observing to inform guidance. And that means listening for and eliciting feedback on your own performance. No one knows what motivates your associates better than they themselves. The best coaches keep perspective from the sidelines and constantly adapt toward incremental successes, in constant communication with the team and its players individually. When done well, it is rewarding for all involved. As a manager, it could mean that you’ve motivated, guided, and influenced someone’s career—and perhaps even his or her personal life—in positive and wonderful ways.

And what could be better than that? [AQ](#)

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