



Why Every Organization Should Teach Its Managers HOW TO COACH

BY RUSS TERRY

Do you coach your team members? You probably think you do, but most managers and leaders have an incorrect view of what coaching is.

Here's how: Often managers will say, "I'm coaching my employees," but what they really mean is, "I'm telling my employees what to do and giving them advice on how I would handle a situation differently/better."

Listen up, folks. That's not coaching, that's telling. Telling has its place here and there. When appropriate, you can put on your "manager hat" and tell an employee something. However, if you want team members to be more likely to accomplish their goals, which hopefully align with your goals and the company's goals, then true coaching is a better way to go.

OPEN QUESTIONS, ACCEPTING TONE ARE KEY

Your employees are human beings. As humans, we are much more invested in a solution if we come up with it. An excellent coach asks open-ended questions to help someone determine the answer that's right for him or her, which may not be the answer we would have provided. Chances are, it's still a great way to resolve the matter at hand.

Here's an example. Many years ago, I had a coaching client who was working 15-hour days. Her solution was...to sell her house! I thought, Hmm, that's not the answer I would've chosen, but let's see where this goes. (More on that later.)

Her thinking was that if she lived in a different area, with more nature, she would be inspired to spend more time enjoying all that beauty, not inside in front of her laptop. So she decided to move, and that solved the issue. Fast-forward a year and,

empowered by the first move, she moved again, this time halfway across the country. A few years later, she met an amazing guy in that new city, and last year they had the most incredible wedding overseas. How's that for a happy ending?

What can start as a professional discussion in a coaching session can have an amazing result in someone's personal life. How cool is that? Want to be pivotal in someone's life? I sure do!

A minute ago, I promised to come back to the "not the answer I would've chosen" statement. That's a key to great coaching. You want to approach it with an open mind—a blank slate, if you will. Let people come up with the answer that's right for them. They know themselves better than anyone, including you. This means asking *no*, none, zero, zilch "suggestion questions." Examples of these include:

- Have you thought about...?
- Do you think you should...?

Both of those are *your* solutions that are not-so-cleverly disguised as questions. Please don't do that. We beg of you. Instead, ask open-ended questions, which start with "how" and "what." These will lead to robust answers that the person comes up with. For example:

- What do you want to accomplish in our discussion today?
- How can you make that happen?
- What was your reasoning for going down that path?

Notice that we didn't say "why" in that last question.

“Why” puts people on the defensive. Think about it: “Why did you do that?” sounds accusatory. “What was your reasoning?” is more neutral.

As a coach, you want to have a positive or, at worst, neutral tone, and certainly not a negative tone. Tone is the vibe or mindset in a coaching discussion. It should be curious. You want to understand the person better, including two very important aspects of every human being: the emotions he or she is experiencing and the motivation for doing something. Many newer coaches skip over these crucial aspects and head straight into solution mode. Just as we shouldn't give people the solution, it's also beneficial to help them explore the situation in some detail before they come up with the solution that's best for them.

DON'T IGNORE EMOTIONS

Similarly, if people haven't released some negative emotions, it's helpful to do so before they get into answer mode. When someone expresses emotions to you—explicitly or implicitly—it's important to show that you're listening and comment on those emotions, rather than ignore them.

The best thing to do here is to acknowledge and validate. A good example of A&V is:

A: I can see you're quite upset.

V: It's natural to feel that way. Most people in your position would be upset.

If you were to ignore their emotions, they will feel that you're not listening to them. Then, they won't share as much with you, and you can't coach them if they don't reveal stuff. Also, when they share their emotions, they will likely vent about what's bothering them. That too is an important step, because it helps them release the negative emotions and start to move into a positive, solution-oriented mindset.

WHERE TO GAIN COACHING SKILLS

Curious to learn more, get some practice coaching, and receive feedback on it? Well, American Management Association has just the courses for you:

- *Coaching for Optimal Job Performance:* This class is intended for supervisors and managers.
- *Coaching: A Strategic Tool for Effective Leadership:* This course is suited for higher-level management and leadership.

In both AMA coach training courses, we share with you a GUIDE on how to coach. Here is what we teach:

G—Gather data

U—Understand the impact

I—Interview to discuss actions and motivation

D—Develop an action plan

E—Execute plan; examine results

At each stage in the process, ask your team members open-ended “how” and “what” questions to get them to come up with the best solution for them. Some good example questions include:

G—How are you? (A simple question like this can lead to big answers.)

U—What's the impact of this situation on you?

I—What was your thought process in taking those steps?

D—So, what's next?

E—What specifically will you do? By when?

One of the many cool parts about coaching is that you don't know where the discussion will lead next. Your subsequent questions are all dependent on the answer the person gives you. An excellent coach exhibits powerful intuitive listening. This means that as a coach, you should not have a predetermined opinion on what the person should do or an agenda for where you want the discussion to go.

Often folks are overwhelmed with lots of ideas swirling around in their minds. A coach helps them filter or funnel all those possibilities down to *one* thing to discuss today.

As you navigate the coaching discussion, see where it leads and ask the person open-ended questions to choose the best path at that moment. You'll notice that the example question for the D in GUIDE is “So, what's next?” In some cases, when you get to this step (develop an action plan), the topic may be different from the subject the team member originally mentioned in your coaching session. No problem! Often, as someone discusses the various things happening, his or her priority for the session shifts. Go with the flow. GUIDE (pun intended) the person with your powerful open-ended questions.

Just because we give you the GUIDE here, that does not mean that every manager in your organization shouldn't attend our coach training classes. It's important to learn how to coach, get practice and feedback from one of our seasoned coaches, and then practice some more with more feedback, before you're ready to coach your team members.

Also, you'll want to witness powerful coaching demonstrations. At least once or twice in each class, you will see your facilitator coach a participant. It may even be you! Get ready to hear lots of “wows” and “That was really great” comments. Magic can happen, and we want you there to experience it. Just think, you could then be on your way to creating magic back at your organization. How cool would that be? [AQ](#)

Russ Terry is a life coach who helps people accomplish their goals, reach their full potential, and live a more robust, healthy life filled with family, friends, outside activities—and career satisfaction. Terry is also an AMA faculty member who teaches courses on leadership and management. He can be reached at www.russterrylifecoach.com