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Business Matters: Learning to Coach Employees

By Angela R. Hooper-Menifield, MPA, SPHR, SHRM – SCP, Certified Human Behavior Consultant / Menifield & Associates

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Having been a supervisor for over 25 years, it was not uncommon for me to assert that I was a good leader and that I effectively “coached” my employees. The irony of this statement was that, like so many supervisors, I found myself combating the same struggle year in and year out; having to repeatedly give the same instructions to employees over and over again.

Then there were the times when I was out of the office, either on vacation or attending an industry meeting, and a crisis arose. In those situations, it never seemed to fail that someone would end up calling, emailing or texting me about the situation. The team could only handle situations at a basic level and then they needed to be “told” what to do. As their supervisor, I found this very frustrating, as I was continuing to wonder, how many times did I need to tell them the same thing?

As I grew and developed myself as a leader, I came to realize that each and every time I answered those questions, replied to those messages, and/or told the team how to handle a situation, like a “good supervisor”, I was hindering their development and training them to come to me when those types of situations arose.

In my mind, I thought that if I told them what to do “this one time” that the next time they would duplicate or remember this process. Unfortunately, I was totally misleading myself. Time and experience eventually taught me that I was teaching them that, when they had a difficult situation, the answer was to contact the supervisor (me) for the solution. When this became the standard operating procedure (SOP), I was denying them an opportunity to grow, develop, learn, and fail forward. This solved the problem in the moment but left the team totally dependent on me. This was not coaching, but directing and supervising.

If telling the employee what to do, or what they did incorrectly in each situation, is not coaching, then what is? Think about it. We see “coaches” on TV and in the sports arena daily, pulling athletes aside, instructing them and telling them what to do differently, so why isn’t this coaching? Well, the true premise of coaching begins with this as its origin - a process used to transport people from where they are to where they want to be.

In application, coaching uses a range of communication skills – such as targeted restatements, listening, questioning, clarifying, etc. – to help clients, or in this case, employees, shift their perspectives and discover different approaches to achieve their goals. Coaching is different from mentoring and directing, which are also both good, in the right situation.

Coaching starts with the premise that the individual is complete, whole, fully trained, needs nothing new, is fully resourced and 100% potentiated. Coaching is not for situations when training is the solution to a skills gap. In other words, once I am sure my employee is equipped and knows what to do in a given situation, and has demonstrated that knowledge, yet fails to carry it out, I can then effectively coach them. If I direct them or tell them what to do, then they will just follow my instructions. If I coach them – asking questions, listening, making clarifying statements, etc. – to help them arrive at the conclusion as to what went wrong, what they can do better, what other options were available, etc., then this employee will be more inclined to remember the resolution.

It is no different than when we, as youngsters, asked our parents or teacher how to **spell a** word and their answer was for us to either look it up ourselves or spell it out. They were not being mean, but realized that if we took the time and effort to figure out how to spell the word, odds were that no one would have to spell it for us again. If we allow our employees to be coached by us, work through the reasoning, make mistakes, and arrive at the best solution, we will train them how to do it the next time.

The other benefit to this process is that it helps us figure out, when they err, where it happened, as they will have a thought logic that can be traced and dissected.

Is it quicker in the moment to tell people what to do? Yes. But do you always want your employees to need you to give them solutions? How are you creating a succession plan and creating the future leaders and supervisors in your organization if you are not coaching and training others to logically and methodically process and deductively reason?

As the saying goes, pay me now or pay me later. You can grow your team daily and have developed and prepared players ready to step up, or you can promote individuals with technical competency that are not equipped with the capacity to think or reason that the position demands. Coaching takes time, but it is time well invested.

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