

Essay 2  
Coaching a Marginal Performer

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## Introduction

Whether it is an employee, an athlete, a politician, or a volunteer, people often encounter situations where either they are challenged due to complexity or their performance is not up to the level of quality deemed adequate by leaders or peers. For both of these situations, the person can benefit from coaching. Coaching is a technique used by leaders to help performers overcome challenges or improve observable performance. In and of itself, coaching is a complex process that may require a lengthy time period for noticeable results (Ting & Hart, 2004). According to an interview with John Wooden (recognized basketball coach for UCLA) conducted by Davenport (2006), coaching for business and for athletics is similar, although not the same. The task is similar in the fact that “Being the head of anything, you have to set an example” (p. 1). Leading by example is one of the principles of coaching identified by Ting and Hart.

## How to Coach

For a leader, the task of coaching may seem simple. Address a concern with a performer, tell them what is wrong, tell them how to correct the behavior, and expect improvement. The flaw in this description is people do not often react positively to being told what to do (Daniels, 2000). Rather than telling a person what to do, a leader should frame up the situation so that the performer is aware of the need for coaching. The goal of a coach is to have the performer be in control with the coach acting as a guide (Ting & Hart, 2004).

Ting and Hart identify six underlying principles for effective coaching. First, the performance environment for the performer needs to offer the performer a sense of security, in which errors can be made while learning with no adverse affects. Second, the performer’s goals are the center of attention and are what is key. Although the coach may have goals also, the coach is not there to achieve his or her goals. The purpose is to help the performer achieve his or

her goal. Third, the coach should assist the performer throughout the process. This assistance may come in many forms such as leading by example or offering multi-faceted reactions to the performer's questions in an attempt to foster decision making. Fourth, the more the performer is aware of his or her behaviors, the quicker the performer will be able to improve. Fifth, the coach, through actions, should demonstrate that the learning experience is not just for this single behavior, but that it can and should be applied every day. Over time the performer should no longer need the coach because he or she will be able to coach him or herself. Finally, the sixth principle is for the coach to demonstrate all of the behaviors the performer is expected to exhibit. If not careful, the performer may label the coach as a hypocrite because the coach is not practicing that which has been expected; it appears the coach has a lesser standard than the performer.

These six principles make up the framework for an effective coaching program. Again, Ting and Hart offer guidance on how a coaching program should look. Their guidance is rooted in a three-prong approach – pre-program, in-program, and post-program. Pre-program activities include: (a) identifying the need; (b) assessing readiness, both organizational and performer; (c) gather demographic and easily accessible data; (d) match coach to performer; and (e) evaluate and refine, if necessary, the coaching program design. In-program activities include: (a) performer preparation; (b) identifying a benchmark of the current situation; (c) understanding and translating feedback; (d) designing a performance improvement plan; (e) implementing the performance improvement plan; (f) measuring performance after plan against benchmark; and (g) transitioning to self awareness and sustainment. The third and final prong of the approach is for the coach to undergo a formal evaluation, which should be recognized as part of the coach's self awareness and sustainment program. As this explanation of a coaching process illustrates, it

is complex and the opportunity for missed steps is likely if the appropriate resources are not dedicated to the initiative.

When an employee is under-performing, it is easier to see how this type of program can be implemented and beneficial. Madsen (2005) points out that even “individuals [who] consistently demonstrate a strong work ethic and above-average skills need feedback and guidance as well” (p. 35). Thinking about a strong performer and the model previously described, the likelihood the performer is prepared for feedback is good, and the benchmark behavior may identify to be consistently good performance. The performance improvement plan would naturally be designed to help this performer achieve more or prepare for career advancement. All too often the strong performers are left to their own capabilities because the leaders do not recognize their need and the potential they hold.

#### A Custom Coaching Plan for a Marginal Performer at Company A

The following coaching plan is a representation of a plan that could be implemented at Company A for a marginal performer. To the extent possible, actual considerations will be discussed to the extent possible without exposing the real identity of the company and individual. Company A is a moderate size corporation of about 18,000 employees worldwide. The company’s customers continue to rate Company A as an industry leader; therefore, the leaders within the company strive to maintain and go beyond the customers’ expectations. The leaders also recognize that the front line employees are the ones with the most direct customer interaction; therefore, they are focused on the performance of the front line employees. When a concern is raised about the performance of one of these employees, the leaders activate a coaching plan.

### *Pre-program Activities*

As the first action in the plan, the leaders identify and document the coaching need. They prompt the question 'What is it about the performer that is causing weak performance'. Leaders at various levels of the organization perform frequent performance monitoring activities which are quick to identify performance improvement needs. The next action is to assess the readiness of the organization and of the performer. In some ways, this can be viewed as a 360 degree evaluation on the organization, with an additional one on the performer. This evaluation can be created to evaluate various interests, as there are multiple administrations of different 360 degree evaluations as part of this coaching plan (Rogers, Rogers, & Metlay, 2002). This first evaluation is designed to understand if the organization is prepared, ready, and able to support a coaching program. The second is designed to understand if the marginal performer is prepared, ready, and able to accept a coaching program. The third preprogram action is to gather demographic and easily accessible data. This information is used to help shape the performer's environment, both at work and away from work. There is the potential that the source of the performance challenge is away from work; therefore, gathering this information is an essential part of the plan. The fourth pre-program action is to match the coach with the performer. A successful plan requires a good rapport between coach and performer. Most often within Company A, the performer's direct supervisor will be the coach; however, rather than assuming this match, an assessment of that relationship will be completed to identify the best match. The fifth and final pre-program action is to evaluate all of the data collected and decisions made. This is the leader's opportunity to revise the plan before beginning the program with the performer. Beginning the program with any incomplete or inaccurate information has the potential to disrupt the progress of the program.

### *In-program Activities*

A series of seven events comprise the activities the coach and performer address together. The first is the formal preparation of the performer. It is likely that the relationship, if one previously exists, between the performer and coach will change through this process. Also, the performer is responsible for being accountable for this program, and therefore, needs to understand the purpose and make a commitment. The aspects of the relationship and accountability is documented into a contract that is signed by both the performer and coach. The second and third events go together. Similar to the 360 degree evaluation used to assess the readiness of the performer, another 360 degree evaluation will be conducted to identify the performance of the performer. Once completed, the coach compiles the input. Receiving the feedback from this type of evaluation can be alarming; therefore, it is the responsibility of the coach to prepare the performer on how to interpret and use the feedback. The feedback is the basis for the fourth and fifth events. Once a full understanding of what the performance challenge is, the coach works with the performer to set realistic improvement goals. The performer is accountable, so it is the performer who will set the goals. The coach will help guide the performer, particularly by preventing goals that are too simple or too complex. The output is a formal performance improvement plan. This plan identifies the details of how the performer will progress, as well as setting timeframes, and identifying assessment tools. The sixth event is based on the timeframe identified in the plan. As each milestone is reached, the performance is compared to the benchmark set during the 360 degree evaluation. If the comparison results in good progress and on schedule, the plan continues. However, if the comparison results in slow progress or is off schedule, the plan is evaluated to determine if adjustments are necessary. Even though this is a structured plan with signed contracts, it is necessary to have enough flexibility to

make changes along the way. The seventh, and final, event for the in-program activities is the transition of the coach away from the performer. Progress should begin to show signs of sustainment which is the indication that the performer has begun to take on the learning independently. The relationship with the coach should naturally dissipate while the performer's awareness of learning continues to grow. Depending on the relationship, this separation could be challenging and may have to occur over a period of time.

### *Post-program Activities*

Because every coach is familiar with the concepts of self-awareness and lifelong learning, it should be no surprise that the final part of the coaching program is an evaluation of the coach. Although coaches have extensive exposure to the principles of performance improvement, that does not necessarily mean they practice them. Also, because coaches are human, there is the natural opportunity for mistakes. This final evaluation of the coach is designed to help the coach become aware of his or her performance during coaching program. As a result, the coach may have to define a personal performance improvement plan that addresses any opportunities for improvement.

## References

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