

The Straight Talk Coach

Insights for Leading From Strength

Coaching to Build Competitive Advantage

By Cathy A. Higgins & David J. Kreischer

Most leaders recognize the critical importance of selecting, retaining and deploying talent. Yet do they also recognize the equally critical importance of developing that talent to achieve strategic objectives? In our experience, most leaders respond to increasingly ambitious goals by adjusting team members' roles and responsibilities. However, the same group of people with the same aggregate abilities can usually accomplish only so much no matter how you move them around.

In contrast, improving your team members' abilities through structured coaching and ongoing development offers much greater potential for realizing strategic objectives and creating long-term value, especially in a rapidly changing environment.

In addition to enhancing team effectiveness, coaching can also significantly contribute to an organization's performance. If individuals are not learning and growing faster than the market, then they, others on the team and the broader organization risk losing personal and organizational competitive advantages. This is one reason coaching and development are becoming part of the new loyalty contract between organizations and employees.

As a leader responsible for expanding your team's abilities, how can you

tell when coaching is required? How can you identify the "right" style of coaching for the situation and choose the "right" coach?

“When individuals are given responsibility and encouraged to take risks pay the price, learn and relearn, there will be an unlimited amount of new knowledge created.”

~ Ann Schara

When to Coach

Coaching may be the solution to various challenges, from waning performance to a promotion, succession planning and more. We divide these "trigger" events into four categories, each of which is associated with a different coaching strategy and timeframe:

- ◆ **Changing Behavior.** Declining effectiveness and/or sudden disengagement often signal the need for coaching.

For example, an employee may lose interest after being passed over for a promotion; a lack of teamwork may suddenly become apparent; or a new leader might notice that an individual's work is inconsistent with previous glowing reviews. A short-term "fix-it" intervention is usually the appropriate coaching strategy in these cases.

- ◆ **Evolving Situations.** New responsibilities, a promotion, a new organization, a post-merger integration or similar circumstances frequently call for coaching to help an individual learn how to apply his or her skills effectively in the new context. These cases require a facilitative coaching approach, the objective of which is to help an individual adjust to a new culture, new players and different rules. Although facilitative coaching is also usually a focused intervention, it may reveal broader development needs and transition to one of the ongoing coaching approaches.

- ◆ **Building Leaders.** Coaching can be a vital strategy to help organization develop its next generation of leaders. Goals usually include helping people meet higher expectations and accelerate the pace of learning and change, as well as building bench strength and establishing a fast track for high-potential individuals. This requires a development coaching strategy focused on

fostering the skills individuals will need to help an organization achieve its strategic intent.

◆ **Planning Careers.** The need to renew and retain promising employees, and plan for succession often sparks demand for coaching. This calls for career-strategy coaching, an initiative designed to maximize the contributions of key players.

What Style of Coaching?

Just as there are different events that require coaching and different strategies for responding to them, there are different styles of coaching for particular situations. Ultimately, the “right” style should be defined by the coaching objective, the circumstances and the individual client.

◆ **“Feel Good” coaches** are encouraging cheerleaders who accentuate the positive and tend to focus on the client. They are often best suited to fix-it situations in which the client feels badly about his performance. However, feel-good coaching alone may offer relatively narrow results. Although the individual will probably perceive the situation more positively, feel-good coaching typically will not motivate him to make difficult changes that significantly improve his contributions to the team and broader organization.

◆ **“Expert” coaches** are characterized by knowing how to do things “right” and instructing clients in the “formula” for success. The emphasis is often on the coach’s knowledge and ability to help a client understand a new position or organization. Expert coaches can provide essential skill models to help individuals make successful transitions; yet relying too heavily on this coaching style may limit institutional learning or overlook opportunities to fully leverage individual client strengths.

◆ **“StraightTalk” coaches** – which are clearly our bias – take a dynamic and contextual approach to the ongoing development and career strategy coaching to which they are ideally suited. Although feel-good and expert techniques

come into play, StraightTalk coaching emphasizes two-way, facilitative partnerships, and stresses open, honest discussion of important issues to generate creative solutions. Although – or perhaps because – StraightTalk coaching’s more collaborative and honest approach is harder work for the individual and the coach, StraightTalk coaching has the potential to deliver the greatest improvement to individuals, their teams and the larger organization.

Selecting the right talent
and deploying it effectively
is only half the battle.
Constantly enhancing that
talent is equally if not
more important.

Choosing the Right Coach

Depending on the specific conditions, objectives and preference, a variety of people – e.g., you, a colleague or a professional – could be an appropriate coach. As you consider who is the best fit, try evaluating each potential coach on the “Five C’s,” which are the foundation of a successful coaching relationship:

◆ **Chemistry:** establishing and maintaining rapport.

◆ **Confidentiality:** building trust.

◆ **Caring:** providing a safe relationship in which to learn.

◆ **Creative solutions:** generating new perspectives and behaviors that lead to better results.

◆ **Community impact:** respecting the organizational context and working towards creating value for key stakeholders.

Although there may be situations in which you rank high on each of the Five C’s, inherent political and organizational realities often make it difficult for a leader and her subordinate to be completely open and honest. In many cases, a colleague, someone else in your organ-

ization or an outside professional may be the better choice to coach a member of your team.

Although selecting the right coach for specific team members and situations is essential to improving performance, your choice should also offer broader benefits. Just as many leaders create a “kitchen cabinet” of trusted external advisors to challenge their thinking, provide reality checks and serve as a sounding board, a professional coach can be a valuable cabinet member to provide counsel on leadership performance challenges and directing strategic development efforts.

In today’s rapidly changing environment, selecting the right talent and deploying it effectively is only half the battle. Indeed, constantly enhancing and developing that talent with an eye towards achieving your team’s and organization’s strategic objectives is equally if not more important.

Perhaps that is why coaching and development have become the foundation of a new contract between individuals and organizations. More individuals are evaluating opportunities based on how the position and organization will help them learn, become more competitive and stay marketable. At the same time, more companies are investing in coaching and development with the objective of leveraging each individual’s growth to make the organization more competitive and successful.

As a result, the contract between today’s employees and organizations is no longer about blind loyalty; rather, it is about a true “win-win” proposition of enhancing capabilities and building expertise for mutual benefit. In this light, coaching is more than a helpful response to performance challenges. It is also a key strategy for securing, retaining and developing top quality talent capable of fueling your organization’s growth – and its ability to create long-term value. **HK**

© 2005 Higgins Kreischer & Associates

