

Becoming a Great Coach – Getting Started with the Basics

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In my last couple blogs, I spoke about [Coaching for Development](#), and [Coaching for Discipline](#), two of the main areas where coaching is helpful. But if coaching is a new concept for you as a manager, you may be wondering how to even get started.

There are a lot of books out there, of course. And blogs. And videos. And webinars. And seminars. You can spend a considerable amount of time learning to be a coach. But it really comes down to having a conversation. I'll give you a few basic guidelines, and some specific approaches you can try.



Help Broaden Perspective – Sometimes coaching involves helping the person find a new perspective. Often when a person has an idea in their head, it's hard to see any other options or viewpoints. You can help the person see things differently by asking questions like, "What if that wasn't true?" or "How do you think the client will react to that?" or "What if..." You may find that the individual responds with, "I never thought of it that way," and their approach to the problem or situation changes. Over time, you may find that the individual learns to ask himself these questions and starts to challenge his own thought process for better problem solving.

Carefully Provide Assistance – Sometimes you want to talk with someone about an area they are struggling with, but you know they will get defensive. Paying attention to how you approach the subject can help reduce defensiveness and open the door to discussion. For example, instead of saying, "This report has real problems," try, "I can see you put a lot of effort into this. I was a little confused about this one part, can you help me understand..." The difference is that instead of attacking the report (which they will take personally), you are asking for help with an area that you didn't understand. Another approach is to head off the defensiveness up front: "I'm not saying the report is bad, I think you did a fine job on it, I just need help understanding this section."

Listen – This is a fundamental skill for coaching, and it has many components.

Effective listening means not giving advice. This means asking great questions; questions that are open ended and lead to dialog. So instead of asking "How's it going?" you would ask, "What are you struggling with?" or, "What can I help you with?" or, "You seem frustrated, can we talk about it?"

Listening also means looking for what is not being said by hearing tone of voice and watching body language. When someone looks away and says gruffly, "I'm fine," he or she probably isn't. This is when a coach would say, "I hear you say you're fine, but your tone tells me something is on your mind. I'd like to hear what you have to say." The words we use are just a small part of communication. Paying attention to body language and tone can tell you more about this individual than their actual words.

Effective listening also means giving the employee the opportunity to open up. Get in the habit of always asking, "What else?" What else does the individual want to talk about today? What else is on their mind? What else do they need help with? Asking these questions in every meeting will help open up communication, head off issues that you aren't yet aware of, and help you establish a stronger relationship with the individual.

Change Your Belief – Coaching is a mindset, as much as an approach. You can ask the right questions, and practice good listening techniques. But if you don't have the right mindset, you'll struggle to be an effective coach. So, what is the right mindset? It's simply a belief that the employee is good and wants to do a good job. For example, let's say you're a school teacher, and you have a challenging student named Timmy Johnson. The following year you have Timmy's brother, Bobby Johnson. If you assume Bobby will be as difficult as

Timmy, what will happen? If you are not very careful, and self-aware, odds are good that you will treat Bobby as if he is a problem child, and that will pretty much guarantee that he will be one. You might not call on him as often, you might scrutinize his behavior more critically, you might respond to him less supportively. We all like to think we would not do that, but studies have shown that this kind of behavior does happen, because of our hidden bias.

So, when it comes to your employees, assume that they are good people, trying to do a good job. Assume that they can grow, and learn, and improve. What you choose to believe about a person affects how you treat them, which affects their response to you. The very heart of coaching is this belief.

These tips are helpful in any kind of conversation, whether it be around performance, growth, or discipline. Coaching isn't a difficult skill to learn. You can start with a few basic concepts and improve your communication with your employees. Pick one skill to work on and see how it impacts your discussions. You're on your way to being a great coach!