

Management and Performance Associates – July 2014

The benefits of having a daily habit

“We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.” Aristotle

We were working with a group of experienced managers in a recent training program. Their task was to strategize for a coaching and feedback conversation. After the coach and coachee roles had been identified, we thought we were ready for a typical role playing session, with no major surprises. Sadly, that was not the case.

The coach – Peter – was trying to have a conversation with Jane, about her difficulty in listening to her clients. He opened the dialogue saying: ***“Listen, Jane. Don’t you think it would be a good idea to start listening to your clients?”***

Without a pause he continued: ***“I wonder what the problem is. Have you lost your motivation, or is it that you’re bored with the work, or perhaps you don’t have enough experience? What I mean is, how can I help you? He continued as if his outburst up to now wasn’t enough: “Look Jane, what I would do is listen to them; a lot. If you want to achieve your monthly goals I recommend that you start dedicating more time to your clients.” He then looked at all the observers and said: “Done. Mission accomplished.”***

We were left with the sensation that he had failed; dramatically. Jane looked confused. She wasn’t sure what had just happened.

Unfortunately, this scene is not an exception. It happens in many organizations, regardless of their location, culture, industry or the maturity of the “coach.” There seems to be a widespread misunderstanding about the extent of coaching and feedback. Although we have covered this topic in the past, the confusion makes it relevant to bring it up again. Let’s see:

- **Coaching is different from teaching and training.**

Coaching is not about telling someone what to do. Coaching is a conversational process in which the

coach asks powerful questions so that the coachee may reflect upon his/her performance issues, identify their causes, explore possible alternative solutions and finally commit to an action plan.

- **Not all questions are created equally.**

Powerful questions must be open-ended, brief (such as: Why?), simple, and related to the issue being explored, or to expand on what the coachee is saying. In the previous example, Peter broke several questioning rules. They were close-ended, he asked many questions at the same time, and he offered *“multiple choices.”* Worse, they were confusing and leading to a specific answer that he wanted.

- **Questions should be followed by a pause, so that we can listen.**

Using silence and listening are two fundamental skills which were not used by Peter. A question should be followed by silence, not another question. Give time so that the coachee can think about and organize his/her answer. Remember that listening is more than not interrupting. Signal that you are listening, a head nodding will do it. Paraphrase; offer a brief summary of what you understood, to ensure that your internal filters are not interfering with comprehension.

Let the coachee know that you are listening and understanding—probe, to get to the core of the issue. **When listening, what is your intention, to understand or to just to respond?**

- **Feedback is not the same as telling the other person what to do.**

Peter never provided feedback during his role-play. Effective feedback would have included a specific description of:

- a) The context which led to bringing this topic up
- b) The observed behavior, as if he were projecting a video of the situation, without judgment, qualifiers or exaggerations

- c) The positive and negative impact caused by the observed behavior

Effective feedback should be followed by a discussion of which steps should be taken next.

Peter is not alone in facing this challenge. Practice is the only way to make coaching one of your leadership strengths which brings positive results to both the coach and the coachee.

The only way to develop your coaching skills is by doing them. Let's practice!

See you next time.

We welcome your feedback.

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