

What Coaching Is and Isn't

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Great decision makers focus on the problem to be solved before considering solutions. They ask “why” several times to identify the root cause(s) that are most deserving of their attention. The reason—most problems when first encountered are symptoms of

deeper issues. When you ask “why do we have this problem” a few times, you get to the root cause. Interestingly, you usually arrive at the same root cause, no matter what the symptom: people. What people do, don't do, value, desire, dislike, think about, forget about, plan for, and don't plan for create problems. What might initially appear as a process, system, schedule, profit, revenue, market, client, or product problem was either created by people or will be solved by people. Solving problems as well as leveraging opportunities always involves people.

Getting things done requires people. Even as jobs are eliminated due to automation, people are needed. Technology based systems, artificial intelligence, and robotics, for example, create more jobs than they displace. Most estimates claim that two higher paying and skilled jobs are created for every job lost to new technologies. So the need for people and the need to give attention to people isn't going away. It is increasing.

For good reason most organizations consider *human capital* their most important asset. The challenge is how to attract, select, hire, develop, and retain good people. What can organizations do to develop and retain their top talent? Google has done several acclaimed internal employee studies and identified the answer. Many other companies have come to the same conclusion. The answer isn't what many managers think. In terms of retention, for example, many managers think they can retain their best and brightest with more money, schedule flexibility, or simply doing meaningful work. These are important, for sure, but for top talent who get to choose where they work, these generally aren't the primary factor. The primary factor that is most important to both employee retention as well as development are managers who coach. When employees are asked what they most want in their job, as done by Google, the answer is a boss who takes time to coach them. People want a boss who appreciates, supports, understands, challenges, coaches, and develops them.

If talented people place the highest value on having a boss who focuses on their development, why don't more bosses act like coaches? Why don't more organizations focus on coaching and developing the coaching skills of their managers? The answer for some is that they've not yet figured out the importance of coaching. For others, they don't make it a high enough priority. They let the tactical day-to-day issues and tyranny of the urgent displace coaching. Or they simply work as players rather than coaches.

Unfortunately, for companies who place more value on playing than coaching, their managers aren't able to contribute the value they could be contributing. Instead of motivating, exhorting, guiding, and coaching others how to become great players, they are running the plays themselves. Not only are they not developing others, they aren't creating a high-performing scalable organization.

You may be think that top performers appreciate their bosses running plays with them. A few do, particularly early in their career, but the majority prefer having a great coach. They prefer being empowered to do their job, to be given the resources they need, and a great boss who sets them up for success. They want a boss who prioritizes their success above all else. A boss who is their advocate and who encourages, exhorts, and teaches them. A boss who is their accountability partner. Not a boss who does the work of the team.



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Some bosses think they are coaches, but studies find otherwise. When asked, most employees don't feel their bosses are coaches. Yet when managers are asked, most feel they are coaches. Clearly there is a difference of opinion in terms of what a coach is or does. Coaching isn't merely setting goals and giving feedback. That is a part, but a small part. Coaching is helping people leverage their talents, develop new skills, and overcome obstacles. It is helping people become the best they can be. It is helping people create plans that move them forward. It is holding people accountable to those plans.

How great of a coach are you? How much attention do you give coaching? Listed below are the elements of great coaching. Assess how well you do.

1. **Trust** - Earn people's trust: Are people transparent with their thoughts and feelings?
2. **Expectations** - Agree on clear expectations and desired outcomes: Do you have specific outcomes documented?
3. **Time** - Hold dedicated coaching sessions: Do you allocate 1on1 time for development conversations?
4. **Environment** - Understand people's ecosystem: Do you understand the environment, circumstances, and resources that impact people's performance?
5. **Inquiry** - Ask questions and uncover root causes: Do you ask questions that get beyond symptoms and discover people's underlying behavioral drivers?
6. **Empathy** - Listen and empathize: How well do you understand and verbally relate to people's thoughts and feelings?
7. **Motivation** - Motivate, encourage, and exhort: Do you engage and challenge people in a positive way?
8. **Attitude** - Develop people's attitude and mindset before their ability and skill: Do you shape people's thinking before their doing?
9. **Resources** - Utilize resources, tools, frameworks, and examples: Do you provide visual aids and other resources that reinforce key points?
10. **Empowerment** - Empower and provide opportunities for application: Do you give people opportunities to practice and apply what they learn?
11. **Facilitation** - Facilitate and assist, but don't tell or do: Do you help people understand and plan without telling or doing the actual work?
12. **Feedback** - Give feedback: If you see it, do you say it—constructively and respectfully?
13. **Accountability** - Track progress and maintain accountability: Do you monitor progress against expectations and hold people accountable for completing assignments?

Article written by Mike Hawkins, award-winning author of *Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* (www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com), author of the *SCOPE of Leadership* six-book series on coaching leaders to lead as coaches (www.ScopeOfLeadership.com), and president of Alpine Link Corp (www.AlpineLink.com), a boutique consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.

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