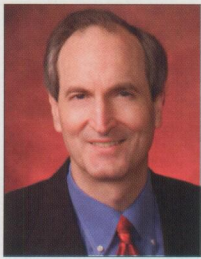


KNOW-HOW > Expert advice for business leaders

Forward Thinking, PART III

Coaching good leaders to greatness



BY TIM MCCARTHY,
PH.D.

Just as diamonds achieve their brilliance only after being cut and polished, many potential executives never achieve greatness because of insufficient coaching. Research shows that 30 to 50 percent of

high potential managers derail and fail to meet expectations. Don't wait for this to happen.

Studies show that 84 percent of leaders coached were rated as improved by co-workers after just six months. Further, surveys of the top best practice companies indicated that 80 percent felt their leadership development

Human behavior and habit patterns are not easy to change.

process increased profitability/productivity and 60 percent attributed cost savings to it. These results indicate the potential returns on investment a company can expect by making a commitment to leadership coaching.

Systematic Follow-up

Many companies say they coach their leaders, however upon closer inspection they lack a formalized process. Coaching sessions are often very informal and infrequent with loose goals lacking behavioral specificity. Human behavior and habit patterns are not easy to change—especially with only a few coaching sessions.

A good coaching program needs to be at least 6 to 12 months long with frequent meetings to help support and challenge the frequent setbacks and falling off track that are to

be expected. The wide range of multiple complex skills of great leadership require continued learning, daily practice and fine-tuning to fully master.

Who Is the Best Coach?

Often human resource professionals or veteran executives are used as coaches. However, the best coach is one who specializes in just that. Professional coaches have extended training and expertise. They have acquired the special skills of how to quickly assess core strengths, motivate and challenge. In particular, they demonstrate expertise in addressing the behavioral specificity needed in developmental goal setting.

Behaviorally Defined Goals

Be wary of coaching that is too vague or focuses only on soft skills of leadership. The more specifically defined the behavior the better. It is now standard practice for many businesses to define a set of competencies that serve as a standard for leaders within the organization.

Research indicates that 75 percent of organizations have initiated some type of competency modeling which typically has a custom-designed list of 8 to 15 general leadership competencies to aspire for and use as a performance standard. However, it was found that these competencies tended to vary too widely in definition and lacked behavioral detail for performance standards making them a less effective developmental tool for coaching.

For example, a company might list “Communicating inspirational vision” as a competency, but fail to fully outline a set of behavioral skills, activities and/or practices such as:

- Frequently communicates inspiring vision — minimum of 2 to 3 times/day
- Uses compelling language or phraseology as some aspect of the business vision, mission and values

- Shows passion or enthusiasm in voice tone and body language.

Now we really have some specific behavioral objectives the leader can be coached in that also allows more objective measurement of progress. Finally, tying these to measurable business performance goals is the ideal.

Measurement of Coaching Progress

Effective coaching employs good ongoing feedback from co-workers who directly observe the manager — not just one's superior, but especially subordinates. Periodic review with written comments and ratings of progress in areas defined as in the above specific behavioral goals is recommended. This can be done confidentially, or better yet, in an open dialogue format with several pre-selected co-workers committed to helping the coachee as ongoing internal feedback coaches — assisting the primary lead coach.

Open Feedback and Dialogue

The concept of open feedback and dialogue can be taken to an optimal level if all managers within a team engage in reciprocal co-coaching and honest feedback. This takes coaching to the highest ideal of a true coaching culture. Managers collaborate in the design of development plans, give ongoing feedback on progress and mutually coach each other. This is indeed the ideal!

Using a well-armed strategy of proven coaching methods will maximize the possibility of seeing real leadership change and bottom-line return on investment. **MB**

Tim McCarthy, Ph.D. (tmccarthy@execperform.com), president of Executive Performance Consultants (www.execperform.com), is an executive coach and consultant for leadership, sales and business performance improvement.