



A Coach's Job is Never Easy

By Mike Cook

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It's great that you want to coach your people. Have you considered “being coachable” yourself as a way to start? These are challenging times, especially for managers. Constant and unpredictable change is the new way of life. These circumstances, unique in human history, require that we authentically rely on each other in ways we might never have imagined during our previous working experiences.

As managers, we need to develop new kinds of working relationships with those who report to us. Relationships between managers and their reports now require a certain level of intimacy, an ability to get up close and personal to provide the kind of direction needed when there simply is no time to spare. You might have figured out already that simply being smart or experienced is not enough to jumpstart this kind of relationship. Being “coachable” is.

“Humility is the only true wisdom by which we prepare our minds for all the possible changes of life.”

—George Arliss (English Actor 1868-1946)

I have heard countless managers bemoan the thought of yet another “coaching” conversation with a report who will listen politely and then leave without providing any sense that the conversation was appreciated or that another one like it would be welcomed. And then there are those who just openly roll their eyes. Many a manager, exasperated, has asked, “How do I get through to these people?”

Maybe that's the wrong question. Perhaps we should look first to ourselves and ask how someone has ever “gotten through” to us.

“Be the change you want to see in the world.”

—Mahatma Gandhi

Recently, at the end of a workshop day, I found myself eating dinner solo. At a table nearby, a man in his forties was dining with two young women, one of whom appeared to be in her late twenties, the other in her mid-thirties. From what I could gather, the younger woman reported to the older woman and they both reported up to the man. The conversation at their table was obviously intense. Being the busy-body, or, should I say, student of human nature that I am, I listened in while pretending not to.

The man was in near-lecture mode, aiming his remarks at the younger woman in an even-toned, almost fatherly manner. From time to time, the woman who was the younger one's manager would chime in with an "I agree with that" or "I've seen that myself" or a "When you've been around a little longer...." The younger woman was very animated in her responses. She seemed to be in, as they might have put it in "Star Trek," a "shields up condition." She was bobbing and weaving like a boxer in the ring under siege, doing her very best to fend off every suggestion her senior colleagues were offering.

The man seemed to be an experienced tutor of young talent. As the younger woman continued to defend herself, he slowed down his speech, lowered his tone of voice, and tried saying the same thing several different ways in hopes of breaching her defenses, all to no avail. I could imagine that this conversation might someday come back to haunt the young lady, as she headed to her exit interview, where her manager would say something like, "Well, we tried to warn you but you just didn't seem to want to listen." Ouch!

Good managers know you cannot have a coaching conversation with someone who has no interest in being coached. I am not saying that these two weren't good managers. I will say that it was not their best night and I don't think they were great managers.

How can I say that? Because great managers know that before they attempt to coach others, even those willing to be coached, they should fully appreciate what it means to allow someone to coach them, and to *be* coachable. This is what provides great managers with the empathy and skills to help a report be coachable, too.

What does it mean, to "be coachable?" Here is my made-up definition:

Coachable (adjective)—the condition of being open and available to be coached. A word that combines **the verb, coach** [to train intensively through detailed instruction, frequent demonstration, and repeated practice (as for an examination, a dramatic performance, or a public appearance)] and **the adjective, able** [possessed of needed powers (intelligence or strength) or of needed resources (as means or influence) to accomplish an objective.]



We live in a working culture that often sees **need** as a sign of weakness or limitation. Many of us have been educated in systems that placed a premium on having the right answer. No answer was always better than a wrong answer because a wrong answer could make you vulnerable to the slings and arrows of your unmerciful peers when you were younger. When you entered into your working or career years, you may have noted that **looking good** seemed to be valued over **being a good performer**. Looking good could easily become one's primary motivation, where we actively avoid the risks associated with being the best we can be.

If we are ever going to be truly valuable managers for our direct reports, we must begin to take on those risks and develop an appetite for "being coached." Here are a few questions you can ask yourself to test your own "coachability."

- Am I more committed to achieving my objectives than I am to pretending I know what I'm doing? When he was about to offer me counsel, my first manager used to ask me, "Mike, would you rather be right or be rich?" Boy, that question used to set me off!
- Am I willing to accept sound counsel from any source, not just a chosen few? Could I allow one of my reports to coach me?
- Before asking for coaching, do I check to see if I have any reservations about what counsel I might receive?
- Before I ask for counsel, do I ask myself whether I'm really looking for new perspectives or simply for agreement about how hard things are?
- If I receive counsel that I don't understand, will I stay in the conversation until I do?
- When I receive sound counsel, will I be grateful and openly acknowledge others for their contribution?

"Our best thoughts come from others.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson (American Poet, Lecturer and Essayist 1803-1882)

If you ask yourself some or all of these questions on a regular basis, I can assure you it will make you a better coach than all the coaching skills classes you will ever take, combined. You will come to know not just what to do as a coach, but also what it takes to be coached as well—and that's the most important knowledge of all.

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