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The Tao of Coaching

Boost Your Effectiveness at Work by Inspiring and Developing Those Around You

Max Landsberg • Profile Books © 2015 • 224 pages

Leadership / Coaching

Take-Aways

- Good coaching means helping employees arrive at solutions with guidance, not telling them what to do.
- Coaching returns benefits to the coach, including better customer and client relations, a stronger team, a more loyal following and increased self-awareness.
- Effective feedback sticks to specific observable facts according to the acronym “AID”: “Actions,” their “Impact” and the “Desired” outcome.
- Organize your coaching session according to the GROW acronym: “Goal, Reality, Options, Wrap up.”
- Tailor your coaching style to fit an employee’s “skill and will to accomplish the task.”
- Determine what factor most motivates your employee, and build on it.
- Focus your coaching on the company’s strategic and operational goals.
- If you are being coached, don’t ever get defensive, just express gratitude and do what the coach says.
- Take “voluntary, visible, irrevocable and specific” steps to achieve your goal.
- When coaching higher-ups, stay positive for the first few sessions.

Recommendation

Drawing on 30 years of experience, coaching expert Max Landsberg updated and expanded this third edition of his bestseller. He organizes his model – which shows how to conduct Socratic coaching by asking strategic questions – into concise chapters, each articulating a main concept. Chapters begin with a relevant cartoon and a pithy motto, and close with charts showing the problems that Landsberg addressed and the solutions he suggested. Multiple appendices give managers specific evaluation tools and exercises. Landsberg teaches the real, heavy lifting of building up people’s achievements in the workplace. Happily, his book is not burdensome; it’s highly readable and sliced into easily digested bites. He helps you exercise a psychological skill, one on one, without drifting into therapeutic counseling. *getAbstract* recommends Landsberg’s enlightened, easy-to-use “toolkit” to anyone seeking to become a great coach and to those who are being coached.

Summary

How to Be a Great Coach

You can learn the crucial skill of coaching employees and you can improve with practice. Proper coaching benefits coaches as well as the employees they coach, and it teaches them a variety of skills, from improved communication to more effective team building. To become a good coach, heed these 20 lessons:

1. “You Can’t Be a Leader Without a Following”

Your effectiveness as a manager derives from your ability to nurture, develop and retain talent. Most large organizations are removing levels from their hierarchy – “delaying” – and are competing to attract and nurture only the most promising workers.

“The foundation of all successful coaching is surely an open, trusting relationship with a healthy reservoir of goodwill on both sides.”

Employees know that some companies have strong coaching cultures, and they prefer to work for these organizations. With the rapid changes in markets and technology, you cannot wait for an annual training seminar to keep your team members up-to-date. Nurturing their talent daily saves valuable time in the long run.

“Great coaches – while aware of the principles of psychology – often work in a more straightforward manner with observed behaviors and actions.”

You can no longer simply tell someone how to do a job. You must coach and mentor staff members. Managers who are determined to excel also seek coaching for themselves. Team members should teach and learn new, worthy skills and habits from each other. If you become a great coach, people will want to work for and with you, and your relationships will improve.

2. “Ask Questions – Don’t Just Tell”

Managers who hurry back to their own work never turn out to be good teachers. To be a great coach, ask the right questions. This will help you guide the people you’re coaching in discovering their own best answers about the task, the time frame and their own skills.

“A well-defined working approach is integral to effective teamwork and essential for a positive coaching environment.”

In each interaction, coaches must decide whether to offer instructions, suggestions or leading questions – or something in between. If a task is critical and inaccuracy might prove disastrous, an immediate, controlling response is best. Where you have time and room for interpretation, your technique might be more open-ended and ultimately empowering for the worker. You must evaluate and respond to your staffer’s interest in and grasp of the subject.

3. “Receiving Feedback Means Active Listening”

Employees who ask for feedback on their skills or their performance of a particular task tap into a valuable tool for the workplace and life. If you want an evaluation of some area of your work, be specific about what you want a coach to assess and choose the appropriate person. Ask someone who observed you doing the specific task that you want him or her to evaluate. For instance, gather management feedback by asking a subordinate to judge your work and leadership style. Query an audience member for a critique of a presentation. Tell people what you would like to discuss, and give them time to prepare their suggestions. Listen without defensiveness, give feedback of your own to develop a meaningful relationship, say thanks and follow their guidance.

4. “Coaching Also Benefits the Coach”

Sound coaching is never entirely selfless. Investing 10 minutes daily in coaching usually ends up creating “20 minutes of extra time” every day for you, because it helps your team members become more independent, more competent and more able to work on their own.

“Goal, Reality, Options, Wrap up...That structure always seems to work if you want to have a really effective coaching session which goes beyond simply providing feedback.”

To be a genuinely helpful and first-rate coach, you must know yourself. Honing the interpersonal skills you need as a coach leads to better customer and client relations and a more devoted and loyal team. Your staff will far better understand how to improve if you tell them precisely why and how they did a good job. Explaining their mistakes and dictating actions for the next time generates poor performance and staff resentment.

5. “Guide – Don’t Judge – When Coaching”

Providing feedback that an employee can accept without feeling “judged” or “guessing” is a delicate art. Share specific positive reactions whenever possible. Constructive feedback should focus on observable facts and behavior. Avoid labels or citing “assumed traits.” The backbone of your comments should be what the employee does and says, not what you construe he or she may be thinking or feeling.

“People who write down their goals...are already starting to envision how they could break down overall goals into manageable components.”

Structure your discussion around the acronym “AID.” A stands for the employee’s actions, good or poor, in the specific area you address together; I is for the impact these actions generate; and D is for the staffer’s desired outcome. Avoid negative feedback – never describe a perceived shortcoming without offering a resolution.

6. “Organize Your Coaching Sessions Well – Start in the Correct Direction”

The “GROW” model is a well-known coaching tool. The coach and the employee agree at the outset on a specific “Goal” for the session – i.e., dealing with a specific issue and objective. “Reality” refers to particular examples and behaviors that you and your employee refer to. Discuss the “Options” the person you’re coaching might adopt. Make choices. “Wrap up” includes a commitment to action, specific steps and a time frame.

7. “Great Teams Overcome Differences in Styles of Working”

A simple personality test, such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, increases understanding and respect for team members who operate with different personal styles and modes. Urge members of the team, managers and coaches to take the test so everyone can discuss the results to increase awareness, tolerance, and an understanding of differences in thought and manner.

8. “Overcome Your Coaching Blocks, or You Will Never Delegate”

The first person you coach is always yourself. If you are reluctant to be a coach, try to ferret out why. Most commonly, it’s a strong need to control everything. But the reason is “irrelevant.” What matters is finding and using the right technique to lift yourself out of this rut, whether it means starting by coaching someone you find approachable, or simply asking your employees how they would like to receive feedback. If you refuse to attempt to overcome this obstacle, you might need to examine your desire to lead.

9. “‘Instant Payoff’ Coaching Can Work, Though Only If Delivered Well”

When employees aren’t getting a job done, try the “Instant Payoff Coaching” technique to keep things moving. To break a logjam in as few as five minutes, ask the employee in charge to list all the problems occurring and to assign accountability for each roadblock. The person can accept responsibility, ascribe responsibility to someone else or determine that the situation itself is the problem. Based on those responses

and the desired outcome, the coach and the employee can fashion a doable strategy and plan for it to unfold within a given time frame. Focus on each employee's responsibilities. Teach employees that solutions they can embrace are always available, no matter how apparently insignificant they seem.

10. Evaluate “Will, Not Just Skill”

Tailor your coaching style to the level of your employees by evaluating their skills and their will to accomplish a task using the “Skill/Will Matrix.” Over the long term, you want team members to increase their skills and their will to improve. While this theory is simple and straightforward, executing it is not. You must diagnose your employees' skill and will accurately and without prejudice. Adjust your coaching style for each person and task to achieve an evaluation that you and your employees can agree upon.

11. When an Employee Hesitates, “First Build Trust”

To coach team members who are unwilling to participate, examine their reasons for resisting your efforts. For instance, are you working with someone who won't accept input from anyone at the company, or just from you? Once you've answered this question, suggest multiple coaching options to help to build trust. Only in the most extreme cases should you suggest having your team member work with an alternative coach.

12. “You Can't Motivate Others if They Can't See You”

Try to determine which cycle – whether positive or negative – an employee is currently experiencing. Be aware of a negative cycle of inertia that displays itself as a lack of self-assurance, uncertain social communication, lackluster performance and “unsatisfying feedback.”

“Socrates saw himself as a ‘midwife to understanding’. He believed that one can help people understand, but that one cannot make people understand – just as a midwife delivers the child, but does not give birth to it.”

Coaching will come more easily for workers in a “Positive Cycle of Motivation” – a state in which they feel confident, want to work at their best toward high goals, and seek approval. Learn what motivates your team members so you can elevate them psychologically when they need it.

13. “Take Time to Anticipate Cultural Differences”

Organizational and national cultures differ significantly in their attitudes about “directness,” “hierarchy,” “consensus” and “individualism.” When working internationally, make allowances for these differences. Your top priority is creating shared team outlooks and goals.

14. “Know How to Set Up Teams Well”

To create an effective team, leaders must present clear and doable objectives, provide for changes and feedback from the team, and review the team's and each individual's performance on an ongoing basis. Focus on a “well-defined working approach,” one of the necessities for smooth teamwork that Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith cite in their book *The Wisdom of Teams*.

15. “Use the Power of Questions that Reframe”

A good coaching question enables the employee to consider the issue from a different vantage point. Your challenge as a coach is to find the right words and conditions to fuel that new vantage point, not just once or twice, but continually.

16. “Coaches Work with Observable Facts, Not Just ‘Gut Feel’”

Coaches are not psychologists or therapists. Do not look for hidden personal problems or underlying issues. Be businesslike, stick to the facts and address only workplace concerns. If someone exhibits significant personal problems, refer him or her to a qualified counselor.

17. “Providing ‘Upward’ Feedback to the Boss Can Have Its Benefits”

Good coaching and feedback skills remain unchanged upward, “sideways” or downstream. You might feel less confident when you first attempt to coach a higher-up. Deliver only positive messages the first few times. This will help you both reinforce correct habits and protocols.

18. “Become Eloquent in the Language of Setting Goals”

The art of setting goals, whether “process goals, performance goals or outcome goals,” is to set the bar sufficiently high. Goals should be “SMART”: “Specific, Measurable, Action-oriented, Realistic and Timely.” Goals must be visible; encourage employees to state their goals publicly and write them down. This enables each person to build his or her consciousness about a specific goal, and to construct and follow steps to its eventual fulfillment.

19. “Mentor Someone and Be Mentored”

Although mentoring and coaching are similar, mentoring creates and sustains a broader and deeper relationship. As a mentor, you may become close friends with the person you are mentoring and discuss many generalized, personal issues. Listen, provide encouragement and serve as a role model, applying all the techniques you would use as a business coach.

20. “The Effects of Your Coaching Can Be Even More Powerful than You Imagine”

A well-rounded coaching strategy should include asking for and getting feedback on your performance. Consider what you hear. What did you learn? Is this particular coaching task specific, limited and complete, or will you continue the relationship?

About the Author

Executive coach **Max Landsberg** also wrote *The Tao of Motivation*, *The Tools of Leadership* and *The Call of the Mountains*.



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