



Closing Gaps and Improving Performance: The Basics of Coaching

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Closing Gaps and Improving Performance

The Basics of Coaching

Key Topics Covered in This Chapter

- *Coaching as a four-step process*
- *Why agreement on coaching goals is essential*
- *Action plans for coaching*
- *Giving and receiving feedback*

COACHING IS AN interactive process through which managers and supervisors aim to close performance gaps, teach skills, impart knowledge, and inculcate values and desirable work behaviors. It is a powerful method for strengthening the organization's store of human capital. Good managers are always looking for coaching opportunities.

Coaching can rekindle motivation and help your subordinates with numerous important aspects of effective performance:

- Closing performance gaps
- Overcoming personal obstacles
- Achieving new skills and competencies
- Preparing themselves for new responsibilities
- Becoming more motivated
- Managing themselves more effectively

Good coaching produces better performance, greater job satisfaction, and higher motivation. It may also improve your working relationship with subordinates, making your job as manager much easier. Formal skill training is another approach to closing performance gaps and upgrading the capabilities of your employees. But that's another subject, which we'll address later in the book. This chapter explains how to identify coaching opportunities, then gives you a four-step process for doing it well.

Coaching Opportunities

Chapter 3 explained how to identify performance gaps. Effective coaching can often close these gaps. But coaching isn't simply a tool for curing performance problems; it's also a practical approach for providing subordinates with new skills—skills they need if they are to take on responsibilities that are more demanding. Consider this example:

You know from working with Claudia that she has real managerial potential. She is a fast learner, works well with other people, and is committed to the company's goals. You'd like to advance her to a higher level, and she has expressed an interest in moving up, but she isn't quite ready. One thing is holding her back: her reluctance to confront difficult and argumentative people. That weakness is blocking her upward mobility. She might get through that roadblock if someone would give her some pointers and encouragement.

Do you have subordinates like Claudia? What coaching opportunities do you see for them? Are you doing anything about them? Answer these questions by making a list of all the people whom you currently deal with and who would benefit from effective coaching, as in table 4-1. Then, prioritize the list to identify the greatest opportunities. Concentrate on these before you move on to others.

TABLE 4-1

Current coaching opportunities

Subordinate	Comment
Claudia	Has trouble with difficult people. She is too nonconfrontational.
Lynn	Must learn to delegate—thinks she must do everything herself.
Philip	Needs help with writing his sales reports. His reports are not well organized.
Carlos	Definitely needs meeting management skills. The one meeting I put him in charge of was a disaster.

Chances are that each of your direct reports could benefit from coaching in some way—either from you or from someone with unique skills. You probably have plenty to share with others. But you don't have all the time in the world for sharing it. So, target your coaching to situations that most demand it—where you will get the highest return on your commitment of time and effort. The most productive opportunities generally arise in these situations:

- A new subordinate needs direction.
- A direct report is almost ready for new responsibilities and just needs a bit more help.
- A problem performer could be brought up to an acceptable level of work if given some guidance.
- A newly minted manager under your wing is still behaving as though he or she were an individual contributor.

Do you have subordinates like these? If so, then you, the subordinates, and your organization could probably benefit from effective employee coaching.

Coaching is generally accomplished through a four-step process:

1. Observation, in which you identify a performance gap or an opportunity to improve
2. Discussion and agreement
3. Active coaching
4. Follow-up

Step 1, observation, is an activity you can do without directly engaging your subordinates and was covered in the previous chapter. The other steps require more direct interaction with your employees and will be addressed here.

Discussion and Agreement

When you've pinpointed a coaching opportunity, talk it over with your subordinate to assure that he or she agrees that there is (1) a

problem that needs fixing or (2) an opportunity to move know-how or job performance up a notch or two. Agreement is the foundation of successful coaching. You build agreement as you pursue the coaching objectives. Do the two of you see the problem or opportunity the same way? Agreement is absolutely essential because you cannot successfully coach a person who sees no need for coaching or who has a different perspective on the problem. During the discussion step, you and your subordinate should talk about the purpose of your coaching: to improve delegating skills, to correct a problem in how monthly reports are being written, or whatever the issue happens to be. You should also brainstorm possible solutions and generate some excitement about the good things that will follow! (See “Coaching As Management” to learn about the pitfalls of not following this collaborative approach.)

Coaching As Management

People who've earned their stripes in command-and-control organizations are inclined to see managing and coaching as two very different activities:

Managing focuses on

- Telling
- Directing
- Authority
- Immediate needs
- A specific outcome

Coaching focuses on

- Exploring
- Facilitating
- Partnership
- Long-term improvement
- Many possible outcomes

The different foci of these activities explain why some command-and-control managers have so much trouble coaching their subordinates. But in organizations where employees have substantial powers to make decisions and act, and where teamwork is emphasized, coaching is a very real part of managing.

Active Coaching

Now that the two of you are ready to begin active coaching, revisit your earlier discussion and confirm your agreement on what the goals of your coaching should be. Since days or weeks may have passed since your initial discussion, make sure that you have a shared understanding. Make this the first order of business, as in the following example:

Well, Lynn, I'm glad that we could schedule this next hour to talk about delegating and how you can become better at it. As a new manager, you're surely discovering what I discovered years ago when I was in your position: that there is never enough time in the day. The only way to get your work done is to delegate some of it effectively.

But before we get started, let's refresh our memories about what we discussed last week. We agreed that it would be a good thing to meet for an hour or so every week to talk about delegating and to review your progress. You said that you would like to reach the point where you could confidently delegate three or four time-consuming tasks to your subordinates. Is that how you remember our discussion?

Notice in the example how Lynn's boss stated his understanding of the earlier discussion and asked for Lynn's affirmation. Notice, too, how he stated the benefit of achieving the goal: "The only way to get your work done is to delegate some of it." The person you are coaching must see a clear benefit in attaining the stated goal.

At this point, ask for a formal agreement on the goal: "So, are we agreed that our goal is to make you a better delegator?" You must get to a point of mutual agreement on the goal of coaching.

Create an Action Plan

Once you have reached an agreement, the next step is to develop an action plan that will produce the end you both desire. An *action plan* contains a statement of goals and the measures of success, a timetable, and a clear indication of how the coach and the coachee will work together. The benefit of a formal action plan is that both

parties know exactly what is expected, their mutual obligations, and how success will be measured. This eliminates the possibility of either party's saying, "Oh, this wasn't what I had in mind" when the coaching program has ended.

Not every coaching situation requires an action plan. Many, in fact, can be handled spontaneously and on the spot, as in this example:

A subordinate handed his boss a report on the second-quarter 2005 sales results of each of the company's sales districts, arranged in column form. "Here's my first draft," he said, "I can have a finished version for you this afternoon. Any comments?"

The boss glanced at the spreadsheet. "This looks good, but can I make a suggestion?"

"Sure."

"Your report will be more useful if you show second-quarter sales for each district in both 2005 and 2006. That way, readers could see how each district has fared year-to-year. Do you see what I mean? I learned that trick from my first boss back in the Late Bronze Age."

"I see the point," he said. "For each region, I could add a column showing second-quarter sales from the previous year and the calculated percentage change."

"Yes, try that in your next draft," said his boss. "Do you know where to find last year's sales figures by region?"

The boss went on to discuss numeric reports like this one, how the company's decision makers used them, and how comparative data helps managers put business results in perspective.

In this example, the boss didn't develop a coaching plan; instead she saw an opportunity to coach her subordinate on the spot. Notice how she complimented the employee on his draft before suggesting how it could be improved. That's on-the-spot coaching, and it is often the most effective coaching method.

Other situations, particularly those with larger scope, benefit from an action plan. One clear example is when a subordinate must bring performance up to a higher standard within a certain time or risk dismissal. Another is a situation in which you are trying to develop a subordinate's skills to meet the requirements of the job or of

a promotion. Here, planning is very useful. For example, consider the case of Harris, a subordinate of Mark. Harris must be proficient in the use of the company's spreadsheet and presentation software before he can advance. In this case, the action plan would most likely include a variety of elements:

- **A statement of the current situation.** Harris currently has only a rudimentary understanding of DigitCalc, the corporation's adopted spreadsheet program, and has never used CompuPoint graphic presentation software. The ability to use these programs for market analysis and presentations to management is required for advancement to an associate market analyst position.
- **Specific goals.** At a minimum, proficiency will be evidenced by an ability to develop market segment data in spreadsheet form, convert that numerical data into bar charts and pie charts, and accurately communicate all data by means of CompuPoint presentations.
- **A timeline.** In their action plan, Mark and Harris would agree on certain milestones of progress, such as these:
 - By March 15, Harris will demonstrate proficiency with DigitCalc via the first-quarter marketing report.
 - By April 15, he will demonstrate proficiency with CompuPoint via a hypothetical market analysis presentation.
 - By May 15, he will develop a sample presentation using both programs and actual market research data.
- **Action steps.** Harris will use tutorials recommended by the information technology (IT) department and will prepare a series of presentations using those programs and current market data.
- **The coach's role.** Mark will meet periodically with Harris to provide coaching and critiques as Harris works toward his objectives. Mark will also provide Harris with technical assistance from the IT department as needed.

Table 4-2 is a sample action plan you may want to adapt for your own purposes.

Should the coach be the author of the action plan? Not usually. The employee should be given the opportunity to develop a plan. Say something like this: “What would you propose as a solution?” Putting the ball in the employee’s court will make the person more responsible for the solution and, hopefully, more committed to it. As the employee describes the plan, challenge the assumptions of the plan and offer ideas for making the plan stronger. If the employee cannot put a credible plan together, take a more active approach. In either case, seek agreement and commitment from the employee to every part of the plan.

Begin Coaching

As you begin coaching, communicate ideas so that the person receiving them can grasp and appreciate their value. For some people, you might communicate through simple telling: do this, then do

TABLE 4-2

Sample action plan

Goal: Learn to use DigitCalc and CompuPoint in market analysis reports and presentations

Timeline: By May 15

Milestone	Measure(s) of success	Review date
Become proficient in DigitCalc	Use DigitCalc on first-quarter marketing report	March 15
Become proficient in CompuPoint	Use CompuPoint to prepare hypothetical market analysis presentation	April 15
Demonstrate independent ability to use both software utilities in work-related projects	Develop presentation using real data and both DigitCalc and CompuPoint software	May 15

Source: Harvard ManageMentor® on Coaching, adapted with permission.

that. Some people learn best through examples. Still others learn best when they work hand-in-hand with someone else. For an example of this last method, let's return to the case of Harris, who needed to learn the use of the spreadsheet and graphic presentation software. His boss, Mark, could have tossed a pile of user manuals on Harris's desk and said, "Study these. They will teach you what you need to know." Instead, Mark set up a projector and screen and asked Harris to take a seat.

"I'm going to treat you to a slide show that Janice Bowman and I presented to senior management two years ago," he told Harris. "It's our business case for the QuikPik product line that was eventually launched last October. The presentation is based on market research data similar to the data you'll be working with if you advance to the associate market analyst level. I'll show you the same data in spreadsheet form after you've seen the presentation."

Mark presented the fifteen-slide QuikPik case, explaining as he moved forward. Some slides summarized customer research findings in short bullet points. Others represented numerical market data in clearly rendered charts: market-share data in pie charts and forecasted cash flows in bar-chart form. Harris could see how the slide presentation, when coupled with Mark's narrative, gave company executives the information they needed to make a decision.

"The reason I showed you this presentation," Mark said, "is to help you see the result of good market analysis—namely, data arrayed in ways that communicate insights to decision makers. If you want to be a market analyst, this is something you must learn how to do. As you learn how to use DigitCalc, you'll see how you can convert data into charts that help people grasp the data more easily."

After some discussion, Mark ended the coaching session. "Here's a tutorial for learning to use DigitCalc," he said as he handed over a CD-ROM. "It will teach you the basics. Over the next week, I'd like you to use spreadsheet data to create bar and pie charts like the ones I've just shown. That will be good practice. If you get stuck, talk to Janice, who has agreed to help. She's a DigitCalc whiz. When we meet again next week, we'll review your charts. I'll also have some new market data that we can develop into presentation slides."

Notice in this example how Mark communicated his ideas so that Harris could readily appreciate their value. Rather than expecting that Harris learn on his own through tutorials, Mark showed his subordinate a complete example of what Harris should aim to achieve for himself. Mark coached in a manner that made it easier for Harris to learn.

What tasks are you trying to help your subordinates perform? Have you provided them with tangible examples of good work or good practice? Have you communicated in ways they can appreciate and grasp? Your coaching will be most successful if you use a combination of telling and inquiry in your communications. Telling a person what to do and how to do it is usually necessary, and telling or showing people how to do things is also effective and saves time. But learning has a bigger impact when people figure things out for themselves. (See “Tip: Begin with the Easy Things” if you are not sure what to focus on when a subordinate is facing several challenges.)

Give and Receive Feedback

Giving and receiving feedback is an essential part of coaching—and management in general. This give-and-take of information should

Tip: Begin with the Easy Things

Some employees need coaching in several areas, which raises the question of where to begin. There’s an old saying that we cannot learn to run until we’ve first learned to crawl and then to walk. Mastery is, in fact, accomplished through progressive steps. This is true whether you are learning the martial arts, piloting an airplane, or managing and controlling a large organization. So, begin with the easy things, and move progressively toward more difficult coaching tasks. This approach will reduce the risk of failure and prepare your coachee to attack more difficult problems with greater confidence.

go on throughout the active coaching phase as the coach and subordinate identify issues to work on, develop action plans together, work on problems, and assess results.

Some people fail to distinguish between praise and positive feedback, and between criticism and negative feedback. Let's make these distinctions clear before we move on. Praise is simply a pat on the back for good work: "You did a very good job with that prototype demonstration." Positive feedback goes further, identifying particular actions of merit: "I liked how you handled the prototype demonstration. The way you began with the underlying technical challenges, described how those challenges were addressed, and finished with the actual demonstration helped us all understand the technology."

Criticism and negative feedback follow this same pattern. Criticism is a kick in the pants and explains very little: "That demonstration was poor. People in the audience were either bored or confused." Negative feedback, in contrast, brings in the details, providing a basis for discussion and improvement: "I think your demonstration suffered from a lack of organization. The good thing was that you showed that the prototype worked. But as a viewer, I wasn't sure of the problem the prototype aimed to solve. Nor were the technical challenges made clear. Let's work on these."

Here are a few tips for giving feedback:¹

- **Focus on improving performance.** Don't use feedback simply to criticize or to underscore poor performance. You should bring attention to work that is done poorly, but it is equally important to give affirming, reinforcing feedback on work that is done well—that helps people to learn from what they did right.
- **Keep the focus of feedback on the future.** Focus on issues that can be improved in the future. In other words, prioritize! For example, if a subordinate's misstep was a onetime event unlikely to be repeated, you might let it go.
- **Provide timely feedback.** Arrange to give feedback as soon as possible after you've observed a behavior you want to correct

or reinforce. “This slide is excellent, Harris. Your bar chart conveys the data in a single glance.” Wait only to gather all the necessary information.

- **Focus on behavior, not character, attitudes, or personality.** This practice will prevent the other person from feeling personally attacked. A person who feels under attack is not in a mood to learn.
- **Be specific.** Instead of saying, “You did a really good job during that meeting,” offer something more concrete, such as “The graphics you chose for your presentation were very effective. You used just the right number of charts to convey the information without burying us in data.”

Since coaching is a two-way activity, be as prepared to receive feedback as to give it. Without feedback from the other person, there is no communication. And without communication, you cannot know if your advice is clear and complete, or if your coaching is even helpful. So, encourage feedback from the coachee: “Is what I said clear?” “Is this where you are having the most trouble?” “Is this helping?”

When receiving feedback, give the other person your undivided attention. Provide evidence of your full attention by periodically paraphrasing what you understood the other person to say. “So, if I understand you correctly, you are not getting the staff support you need to get this job done correctly and on time. Is that right?”

Separate fact from opinion. For example, if someone says that your calculations are wrong and then points out the error, that is a fact. If he or she instead says, “Your suggestion is unworkable,” that’s an opinion. Opinions should not be discounted—either yours or the other person’s—but they shouldn’t carry the same weight as demonstrated facts. So, push back when feedback comes in the form of an opinion. Try to convert an opinion into specific information. For example, if the other person says that you have shown no interest in the coaching plan he or she developed, don’t say, “You’re wrong. I *am* interested.” Instead say, “What did I say or do that made you

think I wasn't interested in your plan?" The same holds true for positive feedback. If your subordinate tells you that your coaching suggestions were helpful, ask for specifics. "How were my suggestions helpful to you?" "Is there anything more that I can do to help you with this problem?" (See also "Tips on How to Get Feedback from Uncommunicative People.")

Finally, thank the person for the feedback, both positive and negative. Doing so will improve trust and be a model of productive behavior to the person you are coaching.

Tips on How to Get Feedback from Uncommunicative People

Some people are not very responsive, especially when they are being coached about a performance problem. Your attempts to solicit feedback may only elicit a perfunctory nod, as if to say, "Yes, I understand." But that isn't feedback, and it's no assurance that the person really understands.

How can you get feedback from uncommunicative people? Training consultant Nancy Brodsky of Interaction Associates, LLC, makes these suggestions:⁴

- Rehearse how you will respond if there is no reaction.
- Practice speaking slowly and taking long pauses.
- Make it clear that you expect a reply—and are willing to wait for one.
- Ask open-ended questions that help the person come up with a plan.

⁴Harvard ManageMentor® on Giving and Receiving Feedback, adapted with permission.

Adopt an Appropriate Approach

There are two basic coaching approaches, and you should adopt the one that best matches the situation.² In some cases, you must adopt a direct approach. *Direct coaching* involves showing or telling the other person what to do; it is most helpful when you are working with people who are inexperienced or whose performance requires immediate improvement. Other situations call for *supportive coaching*; here the coach acts more as a facilitator or guide (table 4-3).

Supportive coaching is especially important for individuals who meet current standards of performance but need to prepare to take

TABLE 4-3

Direct versus supportive coaching

Coaching style and purpose of action	Example
Direct	
Developing skills	Instructing a new employee who needs to develop skills in your area of expertise, or matching the employee with another coach who has the skills needed
Providing answers	Explaining the business strategy to a new employee
Instructing	Indicating the most expedient way to do a task, or working together with the employee on a task or project in which he or she can learn from you—e.g., a joint sales call
Supportive	
Facilitating problem solving	Helping others find their own solutions
Building self-confidence	Expressing confidence that an individual can find the solution
Encouraging others to learn on their own	Allowing individuals with new responsibilities to learn on the job, even if it means risking mistakes
Serving as a resource to others	Providing information or contacts to help others solve problems on their own

Source: Harvard ManageMentor® on Coaching, adapted with permission.

on new or greater responsibilities. With this group, be sure to employ these effective coaching techniques:

- Recognize the good work the employees are doing. Without making promises, indicate that opportunities for advancement are available.
- Invite them to use their experience and expertise to coach others.
- Enter into realistic discussions about career goals.
- Specify the knowledge, skills, and commitment required for different career moves.
- Ask these employees to describe the skills and knowledge they must develop if they are to move ahead.
- Develop a mutually acceptable plan for their acquiring the requisite skills and knowledge.
- Follow up on that plan at regular intervals with measurement and feedback.

Follow-up

Effective coaching includes follow-up that checks progress and understanding. This is the final step of the coaching process. Follow-up gives you an opportunity to prevent backsliding, reinforce learning, and continue individual improvement. Your follow-up might include asking what is going well and what is not. For example, Mark, the boss who was developing the presentation skills of Harris, followed up his initial coaching session one week later.

“Last week, I gave you that tutorial for learning to use DigitCalc, our spreadsheet and chart-making software. Have you made any progress?”

When Harris responded in the affirmative, Mark suggested that he and Harris use DigitCalc to create a set of pie and bar charts. “Here’s a CD with a DigitCalc spreadsheet file. It has market data on one of our

new products. Why don't you open this file and show me what you can do with the data—just as you would if you were preparing a presentation for our marketing group?"

Follow-up sessions like this one are opportunities to check progress, praise progress, and look for chances for continued coaching and feedback. If an action plan needs modification, the follow-up meeting is the place to do it. So, always follow up with these steps. Here are some of the things you can do:

- Set a date for a follow-up discussion.
- Check the progress that the individual has made.
- Continue to observe.
- Ask how the other person is doing and what you can do to help.
- Identify possible modifications to the action plan.
- Ask what worked and what could be improved in the coaching session.

If you're a new manager or new at coaching, your first efforts may feel uncomfortable and may not be entirely effective. Don't be discouraged. Don't stop. Instead, remember that you will get better with practice. So, watch for opportunities to coach the people under your supervision, prepare yourself, and then jump in.

Summing Up

- Coaching is an interactive process through which managers and supervisors aim to close performance gaps, teach skills, impart knowledge, and inculcate values and desirable work behaviors.
- Coaching is a four-step process: observation, discussion and agreement, active coaching, and follow-up.

- As you begin active coaching, confirm whatever agreement you and your subordinate had reached on the goals of your coaching. Before you jump in, make sure that you and the other person have a shared understanding of what you aim to achieve.
- Make sure that the other person sees a clear benefit in your mutual coaching goals. You won't accomplish much if your subordinate fails to see a benefit in the coaching exercise.
- Except for spontaneous, on-the-spot coaching, use a mutually agreeable action plan that will produce the end you both desire. An action plan defines goals and measures of success, creates a timetable, and gives a clear indication of how the coach and the coachee will work together.
- A combination of telling and inquiry is often effective in engaging the other person. Here, you tell someone how to do a task and then ask, "Do you foresee any problem with doing that yourself?"
- Allow for feedback from both parties—it's an essential part of the coaching process.
- Plan for follow-up on your coaching experience. Follow-up can prevent backsliding, reinforce learning, and continue individual improvement.

Notes

Chapter 4

1. This section is adapted from Harvard ManageMentor on Giving and Receiving Feedback, an online product of Harvard Business School Publishing.
2. This section is adapted from Harvard ManageMentor on Coaching, an online product of Harvard Business School Publishing.

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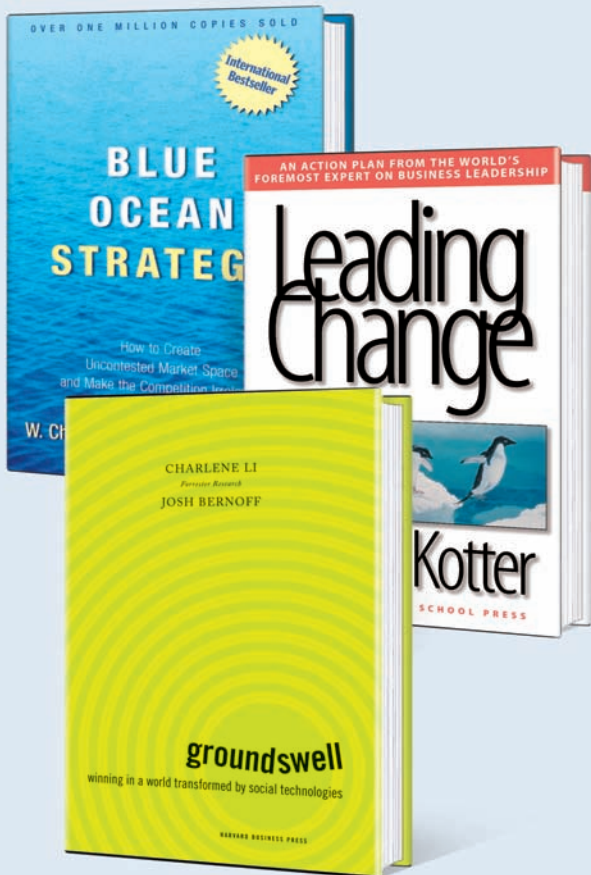
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