

Coaching at work for managers

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Communicating focus and direction should be every manager's *raison d'être*.

Many managers are keen to try coaching with their workforce and to reap some of its many benefits. These not only include improving organisational performance and improved individual job-holder motivation and satisfaction but, for the manager, development of managerial skills and the spin-offs of improved credibility and personal growth. Although they have the desire to move forward, many managers lack a mental map of what happens in face-to-face coaching discussions with job holders. This module aims to help them identify a structure and the skills necessary to facilitate an effective coaching discussion, and to provide guidance through an activity they can try in order to develop their confidence in using this approach.

During face-to-face coaching discussions, there are three strands of activity:

- **Structure.** Provides the route map with which to plan the discussion, helping us to focus on relevant activities and providing a check to ensure everything has been covered.
- **Content.** The topic under discussion.

- **Process.** Involves the skills and styles used to facilitate the discussion.

Structure sets you free

Learning to coach is similar to learning other skills and techniques. There is often some nervousness about doing it, brought about by the uncertainty of having to do something for the first time. Having a structure helps to provide a set of guidelines for what is considered to be best practice.

There are no hard-and-fast rules that regulate coaching, but in order to be successful in the future it is essential to master a fundamental approach. This approach forms the basis of the majority of models for the structure of a coaching and development discussion.

The coaching discussion can be based on the following five phase model:

Phase 1 – Open the discussion

This is an important first step in the coaching process. If done effectively, it will help to build rapport, set the tone and establish

the direction of the discussion. A successful opening will break the ice; put the job holder at their ease; review the purpose of the discussion; emphasise the developmental nature of the discussion; clarify the needs, wants and concerns of the job holder; and establish any ground rules, such as confidentiality, note-taking, separation from other organisational procedures and so on. If the opening is managed well, the discussion will be a positive and helpful event.

Phase 2 – Explore the current situation

In order to move forward, the first step should be to look back. Any past behaviour will influence future behaviour.

Focus on facts to forecast the future.

If job holders have been on the receiving end of effective coaching in the past it probably incorporated ideas such as these:

- Reviewing the results of previous coaching discussions.
- Jointly exploring what is going well on the job and why.

A practice activity

If you are working with a group of managers, divide the group up into threes. During this activity they will play the following roles in turn:

- 1 **The manager.** Their role is to use each phase of the coaching model to help the job holder review a current problem suitable for exploration in this exercise. During the discussion, the manager should use the model to facilitate the job holder's development.
- 2 **The job holder.** They will be assisted by the manager to review their strengths in order to resolve the problem. The manager will help them to identify any development needs for managing similar situations in the future.
- 3 **The observer.** They should watch to see how effectively the manager is able to use the coaching model in discussion with the job holder. The observer should make notes of specific examples of both good and less effective practice, so that they can give the manager some constructive feedback when the discussions have come to an end.

The observer should be given a review sheet before the activity begins.

Method

Work in trios, with each person taking one of the above roles.

The manager helps the job holder to explore any current concern, problem or decision they have to make that is a suitable topic for

this exercise. Together they can focus on any current management/work problem. Examples include these:

- Making better use of my time.
- Managing my boss.
- Motivating a difficult subordinate.
- Getting change accepted.
- Making meetings productive.
- Matching work and home demands.
- Developing my career.
- Accepting early retirement or redundancy.
- Handling conflict at work.
- Uniting and focusing a newly formed team.

After 20 minutes, stop the discussion. The manager then summarises the job holder's position at that time. That marks the end of discussion phase of the exercise.

The observer leads a review. Discuss how accurate the summary was. What did the manager do that helped or hindered? What were the difficulties experienced? How does the job holder feel about the process? What could the manager do to improve their skills in using this approach? The review should last about ten minutes.

Each person in the trio takes it in turn to be the manager, the job holder and the observer.

Each round will last approximately 30 minutes.

Signs that a manager is not suspending judgement include:

- Being too quick to reject what the other person is saying.
- Thinking too much about what they are going to say themselves rather than really listening to the job holder.
- Interrupting to give irrelevant information not needed to solve the problem.
- Talking at a tangent about unrelated topics.
- Taking over the conversation to talk about themselves.
- Giving a judgement on the appropriateness of the job holder's behaviour.

build rapport and engage the job holder are essential skills, and together they make for successful coaching conversations. The main underlying approach of any coaching interaction is one of honesty, sincerity and a genuine interest in the other person and (to misappropriate a George Burns quote about acting), 'When you can fake that you've really got it made!'

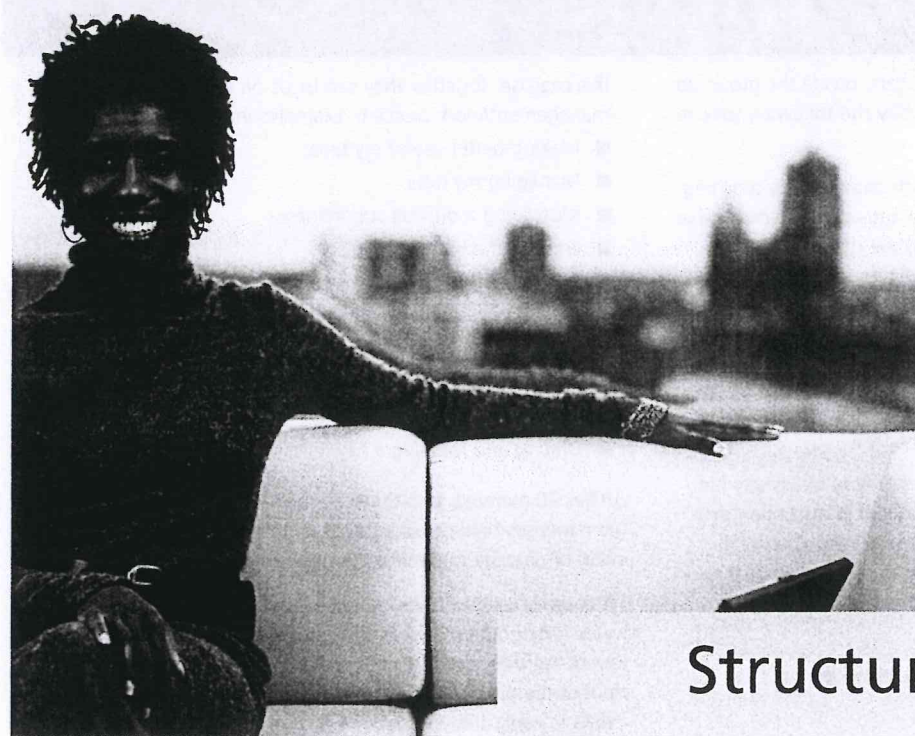
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Summary

For managers new to coaching, using a reliable structure helps build confidence. Knowing how to

*'clarify the
needs wants and
concerns of the job
holders'*



Structure sets you free

- Encouraging the job holder to assess their own performance.
- Helping them identify what could be improved.
- Analysing the problems/issues thoroughly.
- Identifying specific examples of effective and ineffective behaviour.
- Agreeing an order of priority for development needs.

If the discussion is run along these lines, there will be less likelihood that the job holder will think the manager is 'out to get them' and clam up as a result. Building on a positive opening will continue to establish the developmental nature of the discussion.

Phase 3 – Investigate alternatives

This phase needs careful handling, and managers must resist falling into the authority trap – in which they start to take over and impose solutions on the job holder.

Instead of imposing solutions, the manager should work with the job holder to do the following:

- Encourage the job holder's suggestions.

- Discuss how they will meet the identified need.
- Probe for additional (better?) suggestions.
- Help clarify ideas fully.
- Highlight difficulties and resource implications.
- Help generate alternative solutions to blocks.
- Draw fully on the job holder's experience.
- Challenge assumptions and biases.
- Present facts and information about options.
- Make suggestions, but do not impose them.
- Use PROMPT to develop options and alternative actions.

PROMPT

P – People	Who might help?
R – Resource centres	Where might help be available?
O – Organisations	What relevant organisations exist?
M – Models	What have others done in similar circumstances?
P – Programmes	Are there ready-made courses available?
T – Things	What book, tapes and other equipment might help?

Phase 4 – Gain commitment

The work done so far will go a long way to gaining commitment rather than just compliance. If phase 3 has been carried out well, it is likely that too many choices will have been generated. The manager now needs to help the job holder narrow these down into a small number of workable choices by helping them to: focus on priority needs; identify a specific development plan; establish a clear first step; decide who needs to be informed by whom; clarify levels of authority needed by the job holder; agree, monitor and review procedure; establish the manager's role in the process.

Phase 5 – Close the discussion

For the discussion to be handled effectively, it must come to a positive end. This will be the manager's final opportunity to emphasise the developmental nature of the discussion, and to ensure that both participants see it as a positive and helpful experience. The key points are that they should do all of the following things:

- Check that everything has been covered and that the job holder has no questions.
- Start by summarising the purpose of the meeting and the objectives.
- Ask the job holder to summarise the main discussion and their action steps – their own involvement in what happens next.

- Clarify and write down when they are going to monitor and follow up.
- Thank the job holder for their active participation in making the discussion a success.

The description of structure above has begun to put some emphasis on the process – on how they should handle the discussion.

Manage the process – make full use of your skills and style.

Your skills

The essential skills required for the coaching discussion to become a dynamic two-way dialogue rather than a monologue can be broken down into three separate components. A mnemonic for them is **QuIP**: **Qu** – question, **I** – interest, **P** – perception.

- Qu** Use a wide range of questions designed to get job holders talking about their development needs.
- I** Show interest in what the job holder has to say.
- P** Check out the job holder's perception of what they say, so both parties learn from the conversation.

Asking effective questions

There are six types of question. These are set out below, with examples.

Open: What are the main types of problem you encounter in your job?

Closed: Do you have any problems with the new computer network?

Probing: What do you think are the main causes?

Hypothetical: Suppose we revised the manual to screen examples. What effect would that have?

Leading: And you wouldn't want that to happen to you?

Multiple: So do you think the causes are poor maintenance or inadequate training? Is it because

the workload is too high, or is it down to poor supervision? What impact would it have if we drew up a precise users' schedule?

The purpose of questions is to get people to talk and to give information, to allow people to think problems through, and help them to reach a new understanding.

All these outcomes are vital for the manager who is coaching, enabling them to develop sufficient information to be able to focus on positive results. Coaching is done by finding out what the job holder needs to know. Initially, it is necessary to explore what they know about a problem, identify what they have done to resolve it, and help them to think through how they can move forward to a successful resolution.

This behaviour, which uses the skills of questioning, is called **inquiring**.

Interest – show them you're listening

There are a number of behaviours we display when we are listening to someone. These can be summed up by the mnemonic **SOLER**:

- S** **Sit up and face the individual.** You won't convey interest in what they're saying if you are slumped or facing away.
- O** **Open posture.** This demonstrates that you are open to their ideas and haven't put up any mental barriers.
- L** **Lean forward.** Leaning slightly forward, without invading personal space, will signify interest.
- E** **Eye contact.** Maintain comfortable eye contact without fixing them with a frightening stare.
- R** **Relax.** Avoid distracting behaviour such as fidgeting, playing with paper clips and so on.

As with many of these skills, it is the style used that is important. Beware of using **SOLER** as an intimidating interrogation technique.

You should also use verbal ways of showing you are attending, such as 'Uh huh', 'I see', 'OK', 'Yes' or 'No' as appropriate, accompanied by various non-verbal sounds.

Share your perception

The third behaviour that helps develop an effective coaching discussion is responding. This is behaviour that helps the coach to communicate to the job holder that they: are really listening; have understood what the other person is saying; understand how the job holder is feeling; want to encourage the job holder to start to move towards a solution; have suspended judgement.

Key responding techniques

Paraphrase. Restate in your own words the basic ideas involved in what they have been saying.

Reflect. Put back to the person what you have picked up about how they are feeling about what's been going on.

Summarise. Pull the important threads of ideas, facts and feelings together and establish a basis for further discussion.

Focus. Make a decision together on the future of the discussion.

Your style

Experience reveals a key element of effective coaching. It's not just what you say that matters. How you say it is of equal importance. It is crucial that all the skills are put over in a genuinely non-judgemental way, maintaining an attitude of openness.