

CHAPTER 4

Coaching Traps and Problems

WELL DONE, COACHING CAN BOOST individual and organizational effectiveness. Poorly done, it can alienate employees and undermine performance. Let's look at the most frequent traps coaches fall into and how to avoid them.

Hiring the Wrong People

Professional coaches hire the best. Managerial coaches should do likewise, yet too often managers/coaches settle for less. For example, many coaches wait until they have someone on board before they worry about job performance, rather than begin the coaching process even before someone is hired in order to make sure that they get the very best person for the job. Sloppy hiring procedures may leave a coach with a problem performer, somebody he might never have hired if he had known then what he now knows about the individual.

Often, all it takes to identify people with the potential to do good to outstanding work is to hold lengthier interviews, ask more targeted questions to learn about job skills and attitudes, and schedule follow-up interviews either with you or, better yet, with other interviewers. Multiple interviewers generally increase the range of questions as well as provide a variety of perspectives for consideration of applicants. For instance, Barbara may find out some things about the applicant that Casey didn't, but Casey may learn some things that Barbara didn't. And Doreen may discover some interesting things about the candidate that neither Casey nor Barbara did.

BRAD AND NORMAN: THE RIGHT OUTCOME FOR TWO MR. WRONGS

Two managers had interviewed a young man for an opening in the accounting department; the two managers would have to share the employee because they had budget enough only for one new hire, although there was sufficient work for two assistants. Norman was favored over another man, Brad, who was less articulate but brought to the job similar experience and skills. Both Therèse and Mark still weren't sure; although they both liked Norman, there seemed something wrong, so they asked Fannie to meet with him and Brad to get a third opinion.

Fannie spent an hour with each applicant, then met with her colleagues to share her opinions. She agreed that Norman was extremely articulate, but she pointed to something that neither of her peers had noticed: he had never held a job for more than a year over a seven-year period. When questioned by Fannie, Norman had offered numerous explanations for leaving the jobs; in one instance, he admitted that he had been fired. He explained that he disliked high-pressure situations and he had been fired when he was insubordinate to his boss. Fannie admitted that Norman made a great first impression, but as she sarcastically added, he should. "He has had lots of practice interviewing for jobs." And, she added, "I don't know if he will stick around here. He has unrealistic expectations about how quickly he can move up in an organization. When he discovers that he can't be CEO after a month with the company, he will likely get wanderlust again."

Brad didn't fare any better. Fannie had asked him questions designed to get some sense of his flexibility, which is critical when someone is working for two managers. "Brad has a better job record than Norman," Fannie said, "but I think he would have a hard time in the kind of unstructured work situation the job you have entails."

Fannie suggested that the two managers pass on both candidates and take a little longer in their search. Mark was willing to try to make do with Brad, working around his deficiencies, but Fannie made a good point: "The best way to prevent having to spend considerable coaching time with an employee, let alone deal with a problem employee, which could occur with Brad, is to select someone with every reason for succeeding on the job." To do otherwise would ensure that both of her colleagues had headaches down the road.

Allowing Disorientation to Continue

Coaches who neglect to orient an employee or postpone the orientation may find themselves with a potentially effective employee whose work starts to flounder. Such employees are off track because no one has taken the time to put them on the right track; they could have done this by clarifying the performance level expected of them or filling skill gaps first identified during recruitment but neglected in the hurry to get them to work.

Aware of a new hire's shortcomings during interviewing, managers often plan to close that gap with training—either off-site or on-the-job—once the individual is at work. Unfortunately, by the time this person arrives on board, the situation has gotten so needy that the manager's first thought is to get the individual started working. Managers don't undertake a training-needs assessment or develop a training plan for the individual to ensure that his or her performance is up to standard, let alone review with the employee the job description and discuss specific expectations for performance.

Employees shouldn't be forced to fill the gaps in either expectations or skills by trial and error. The likelihood is too great that they will make mistakes, injure their self-confidence, get reputations as poor performers, and become subjects not for coaching but for counseling.

Making Implied Promises

Many managers make the mistake in coaching of suggesting that added effort on an employee's part could land a promotion or a high rating and big raise. It's unwise to use such promises as an incentive unless you can truly deliver on them. A broken promise can undo any improvements in the performance of the employee, as well as cause you to lose your credibility with both your staff and the new employee, who will tell others how he or she was fooled by you.

Sometimes, in order to leave an employee with no misunderstanding, you may even have to raise the issue just to squash it. That is what Neil had to do with Jenny.

NEIL: MAKE NO PROMISES UNLESS YOU CAN KEEP THEM

Neil wanted Jenny, a bright and talented new hire, to take a course in marketing for nonmarketing personnel. As head of marketing, Neil had

found that it always helped if his assistant had an appreciation of the discipline and an understanding of the jargon. But Jenny saw much more in his request. She had told him during her interview that she wanted to move into marketing, and she believed that Neil had decided to put her on a fast track to marketing assistant. Fortunately, however, Neil was aware of her wishful thinking. He didn't discourage Jenny from pursuing her career goal, but he did disabuse her of the belief that a promotion to marketing assistant would directly follow completion of the course.

Changing Management Styles When Coaching Doesn't Work

Good managers, like good coaches, practice *situational management*, adapting the degree of direction they provide employees to their experience and self-confidence and to the nature and importance of the task assigned. But there are some general guidelines in coaching that remain pretty much the same regardless of employee or circumstance: the need for open, honest communications; mutual respect; recognition for excellence and outstanding performance; and shared responsibility for decisions and implementation. These aspects of coaching aren't capes you put on when it is convenient but discard and replace with more autocratic overcoats when things don't go as smoothly as the textbooks suggest. If you do that, you will find it difficult, if not impossible, to re-establish the positive relationship that you had as coach. Trust between you and your staff goes out the window.

What could cause you to lose faith in coaching as a managerial approach to employee performance? Let's assume that you've been put on the spot. Plant management is installing new production equipment, and it wants your crew to install the equipment and be prepared to go on-stream with it in a month, six weeks at maximum. You tell management that you can't get it done in that time period unless it allows for overtime and extra staff during the transition. Management agrees. Now you have to tell your staff.

You have spent considerable time building rapport with your staff. You know that the changeover will come as a surprise to them, but you believe that your crew members trust you enough to know that you wouldn't commit them to such a tight deadline unless it was imperative to their continued employment or unless you believed that the deadline

was feasible—both of which were the case in this instance. So you are more than shocked when the employees you have nurtured, trained, and empowered oppose the plan. Rather than calmly discuss the reasons for your staff's resistance, and make an effort either to convert your employees to your course of action or achieve some compromise, you tell them that they have no choice; you even threaten retribution if they don't work hard, including putting in overtime, to make that deadline. The next case study illustrates this situation:

HAL: THE COACH WHO LOST HIS COOL

Hal, a manager in a southwestern electronics plant, found himself in a tight situation. Hal felt that he and his staff had reached a higher level of communication and that his employees would acquiesce in any request he made of them. So their opposition to his announcement that the staff had one month to install and go on-stream with new production equipment left him annoyed. The greater the opposition, the more he lost control of his temper.

"How could you commit us to something like this?" Doris asked stridently. "We need at least two months to master use of the equipment." Doris was informal leader in the group, and after she spoke, the doubt among crew members developed into outright opposition. Hal found that his efforts to tell the group how it would be possible to implement the plan were drowned out by vociferous team-member resistance. Rather than try to restore order and discuss his plan coolly, he raised his voice and angrily told the employees to shut up. "You have no choice," he said. "The equipment will be installed in March. You will have it on-stream by April 1."

"Sure," Doris said, "April Fool's Day. Which is exactly what Hal is if he thinks we will do what he wants."

Hal overheard. Later in the day, he had words with Doris about her attitude, which only further solidified opposition to the plan. There was talk in the department about going over Hal's head to discuss the plan with the plant's manager.

Hal's Basic Mistakes

Changes in an organization never come easily, and this was a major one at the plant. Hal wrongly assumed that his time spent as coach made it unnecessary to consider how best to tell his team about the change, which as a manager faced with a major operational change,

he should have done. Coaching is not a panacea, a cure-all that will make all management situations you encounter a breeze. But Hal's bigger mistake was to revert to a dictatorial manner when his group questioned his judgment. He violated some key responsibilities of a coach, from listening to staff members' opinions to involving them in the decision and its implementation.

While Hal had made a commitment to senior management, after explaining to his staff the reasons for having done so, he could have asked the group for its ideas about how the changeover might be handled in the tight time frame given them. As a manager as well as a coach, Hal should have thought through the announcement. As with getting support for any changeover, he should have considered the kind of opposition he might run into and should have tried to build support even before the announcement.

From his coaching, Hal knew his employees well and he could have used this knowledge to predict each member's reaction to the news. He should certainly have talked to Doris, who, as informal team leader, could have helped him get buy-in to the plan. As coach, he could have made her project leader; since the position represented a growth opportunity, Doris would then have had more reason to give vocal support to the plan. At the very least, a conversation with Doris would have clued Hal into the kinds of responses he could expect. This would have allowed him to anticipate what to say in response to the resistance. He could even have practiced his responses before the staff meeting to ensure a calm reaction to the employees.

In this instance, he could have told his team why the equipment changeover was so important to the plant. Once his employees understood its importance to their work and, more germane, the capacity of the plant and consequently its continued operation, their attitudes very likely would have changed dramatically. He should also have considered what answers to give to questions that the group might have had, for example: (1) What steps would be taken to acquaint the crew with the new equipment? (2) What would be done during the interim to ensure that work on the old system continued until the changeover? (3) What team rewards, if any, would be associated with a successful changeover? Even recognition by plant management would have been a persuasive factor in building support for the idea.

Hal got the changeover completed in a month, but it took him a lot more time to repair the rift in his relationship with his crew that his angry reaction to its response had created.

And One More Mistake

Hal hadn't considered how his crew would respond and he lost his cool, but he also made another mistake. He began to talk *at* them, not *to* them, about the change. He said, "I want this done," and "I expect you to make it a reality," and "I promised you would do it, and you will do it." He even went so far as to practice a little fear management, implying that failure to achieve the transition in the time allotted might force management to make some reassignments of crew members in order to place on the crew those who would be quicker learners. Instead of this heavy-handed response, Hal could have shifted pronouns and adjectives from *I* and *you* to *we* or *our*, thereby reinforcing the sense of team that likely would have made even the one-month deadline less threatening to the crew.

Undermining Employees' Self-Esteem

I have mentioned the importance of the pronouns you use. The same is true of adverbs. When giving feedback, beware of correcting behavior using words like *always* or *never*, or other adverbs that could undermine a worker's self-esteem, suggesting that he or she *never* does anything well. For instance, you shouldn't say, "You are always late," or "You never complete work on deadline," or "You try all the time to get out of work." Instead, be specific: "Marie, on September 4, you were late by a half hour. What was the problem?" Or, "Michael, while you were traveling on business, I expected you to call. Why didn't we hear from you?"

Focusing on Attitudes

Just as feedback that makes use of exaggerated adverbs isn't constructive (think, instead, *destructive*), so too is judgmental attitudinal feedback. Suggesting that someone is lazy or argumentative or uninterested in her work is demoralizing, more likely to decrease the individual's level of performance than otherwise. After all, attitudinal feedback gives employees little direction to help them improve performance; it suggests no specific actions they can take to do so. Besides, such feedback is not legally defensible if it shows up on the employee's evaluation and is used to make a decision about a raise, a promotion, or, worst of all, continued employment.

Rather than tell an employee that she is "lazy," better feedback

might be, “You don’t lend a hand to other workers and, instead, have been frequently seen reading a novel or the newspaper, even though your co-workers would welcome your help.” Rather than tell an employee that you think he has no interest in advancement, you might note how he has turned down several training opportunities or refused to participate in some high-visibility projects. Or if a customer service rep is short-tempered, particularly when customers ask lots of questions, rather than accuse her of being argumentative, you might tell her, “Mildred, customers complain that it is very hard to get product information from you. As a result, some customers have confided that they are going to competitors.”

Failing to Follow Up

Some feedback is better than no feedback. Managers who don’t assess their employees beyond the quarterly or trimester appraisal reviews aren’t giving their employees sufficient information to help them increase their performance. But feedback is as important, maybe more so, when you delegate an assignment to an employee or when you train one of your staff to master a new skill, and even more important when you empower him or her to do something. Feedback at these crucial junctures may make it unnecessary for you to give negative feedback at the quarterly reviews or end-of-year evaluation. Consider the following scenario:

SOPHIE: THE IMPACT OF FOLLOW-UP FAILURE

The product line for which Sophie, a marketing manager, was responsible had had a tough year. Part of the problem was that the home-improvement tools she marketed had been on the market so long that there didn’t seem much more that she could do to interest potential buyers. Consequently, when she and the product manager came up with the idea to market the tools in grocery stores to housewives who had small repairs to do, Sophie looked forward to the planning meeting at which she would present the idea to senior management, including the potential sales figures.

Busy numbers-crunching for the meeting, Sophie asked Irma to use the demographics she had developed to prepare graphics to go with her presentation, which would be on Monday at 10:00 A.M. Because the presentation was a full week away, Irma, Sophie’s assistant, had plenty

of time to do the work. In the interim, Sophie was busy with numerous chores herself, in and out of meetings and knee-deep in paperwork for what was called by marketing managers "hell week" (or "planning," as senior management called it). Sophie didn't think to ask Irma about her progress on the graphics. She had hoped to check with her on Friday afternoon, but a last-minute meeting with sales distracted her.

Need I tell you what happened on Monday? First thing that morning, Sophie went to Irma and asked her for the graphics. Irma looked at her and said, "I forgot." She pointed to the stacks of paper all around her workstation as explanation, became upset as she saw the grim look on Sophie's face, and began to cry. Sophie just stared at her. Without the graphics, she would have a much harder time getting the money she would need to position the product line in a whole new marketplace.

Who was to blame? Sophie, of course. As Irma's coach and supervisor, she didn't do what she should have done: follow up. Even before that, she should have clarified priorities when she gave Irma the assignment. By making it clear that this wasn't just another clerical assignment, Sophie could have minimized the chance of such a situation happening. If Sophie had told Irma that the graphics were crucial to her presentation, it is possible that Irma, aware of their importance, would have put aside all the rest of her work to do the best job she could on the graphics. At the time, all Irma knew was that Sophie needed some graphics prepared on the basis of a bunch of numbers she had given her; there was no reason to suspect that the job was more important than the correspondence and other tasks she had to do.

But Sophie could have ensured that the work was done on time by following up during the week to see what progress had been made on the assignment. She could even have told Irma that she would need to see black and white proofs by Wednesday. By Thursday, she would want to look at the color proofs with any revisions. "By Friday," she could have said, "the final charts should be done."

Follow-up is equally important when training an employee in a new skill or procedure. Once you have shown the employee how to do the task, then had the individual explain the steps in the task in his or her own words, then asked the person to do the work to show you comprehension of it, and left the employee with some written instructions to remind him or her about each step, you have only taken the first steps in ensuring that this employee performs the new skill correctly.

You haven't finished with training unless you come back about an

hour later to see if the employee is doing the work as you instructed. If the individual isn't, then you point to those steps in the process he or she is doing correctly before noting the mistakes being made. Otherwise, you will destroy the individual's self-confidence in his or her ability to learn how to do the task. Then you and the employee go through the training process once again: you do the task, you ask the employee to explain how the job is done, then you watch the employee as he or she does the task correctly.

Done? Not quite. You should visit later in the day—say, a few hours later—to check again to see if the work is being done correctly. At the end of the day, you might also stop by to see the employee's progress with the work. If all looks well, you can tell the employee so and recognize his or her accomplishment. If there are still problems, you should discuss calmly and quietly the nature of the problem.

Let's assume that all is well. Done? Not yet. Stop by the following week to be sure that all the steps in the process are being followed as they should be. If it is imperative that each step be done as instructed, then you want to make that point clear to the employee and make sure that he or she hasn't developed some shortcuts that erode the quality of the final work. If there continues to be a problem, you want to discover why.

Placing the Blame

The first response most of us give when an employee is having trouble completing a single task (or performing the job as a whole) is to assume that this person knows the nature of the problem and is capable of solving it. Often this isn't the case. Further, when managers hold this view, they can build up resentment toward the employee whom they begin to think is just doing the work wrong to make everyone look bad or to get out of a task or to get even for some slight.

It is usually better to begin with the assumption that the communications on our part as managers were somehow inadequate. We didn't make clear how important the work is, how this work is to be done, or how important this work is in relation to the other tasks to be done. Repetition of the instructions may help to clarify the cause of the problem.

Let's get back to the employee who doesn't seem to be learning how to complete a task and whom we have instructed twice about the work. If the employee is to do the task correctly, you have to find out the cause of her confusion. If English is a second language, that may be behind

the problem. If she lacks some basic information essential to doing the task, then you should go through these fundamentals before going over the steps in the task again. Another source of problems can be the employee's own desire to do more; she may have introduced shortcuts in the process to impress you, but these may actually undermine the quality or quantity of the work. In plants, as we have seen, such good intentions on the part of new workers can even create conditions that make accidents more likely.

Ignoring the Problem

Managers have so much work to do and so little time in which to get it done that it's easy to take the course of least resistance and become blind to staff shortcuts or other less-than-perfect efforts. Unfortunately, when managers ignore these small problems, they can grow to the point that they are no longer coaching problems but are now issues for counseling, as shown in the next case study.

LYNN: A "SMALL" PROBLEM THAT MUSHROOMED

Lynn, head of systems, had come up with the idea for a monthly department report that would be distributed to department heads and other senior managers in the company. The report's purpose was to ensure financial and management support by making these individuals familiar with past accomplishments and future opportunities through use of the new technology. Copy was provided by systems engineers and users and given to Roxanne, Lynn's assistant, who was responsible for producing the final pages using in-house desktop equipment. The report was printed off-site.

The latest issue came out, and as Lynn quickly looked through its pages, she noticed lots of typographical errors. Roxanne was responsible not only for keyboarding the content and logistics but also for editing and proofreading the report. Lynn had seen a few errors in the past, but she hadn't talked to Roxanne about them; she knew that Roxanne had been busy assisting in the development of some technological updates and follow-up training, and Lynn didn't want to come down on her after such a hard week. Besides, Lynn had to admit to herself, she had enough on her own plate; she didn't have the time to deal with something like a few typos in the "constituency" report. But their number had continued to increase. Lynn knew that she had to talk to Rox-

anne about the situation. Very likely she would have postponed her conversation once again if she hadn't overheard a conversation between Roxanne and another assistant, Marilyn.

Marilyn had noticed the typos, too, and had asked Roxanne if she wanted another pair of eyes to help proofread the report. "No," Roxanne replied. "It really doesn't matter. Most readers won't notice."

As Lynn listened, she was appalled. "Of course, it matters," Lynn thought to herself. "This report went to senior management, and its purpose was to send a message to top management about the department's commitment to excellence—in *everything*." She called Roxanne into her office.

"Roxanne," Lynn began, "I looked over the report. There are some really great items in this month's issue, but I also noticed several typographical errors. I like to issue this report because it reflects the very best work done by the team. These typos, small as they are, diminish that image."

"Oh, come on," Roxanne said. "They aren't that noticeable. If they were, I would have stayed late to fix them before I sent the pages to the printer. But we've had errors before and no one has said a word. Even you," Roxanne finished.

"I noticed before," Lynn admitted. "I should have spoken to you about them earlier," she continued. "Would it help if we asked several of the other assistants in the department to read copy, too?" she asked, moving the conversation from a criticism of the work to development of an action plan to prevent the problem's recurrence.

Was Lynn to blame for the few errors growing into many more? Yes. Like Sophie, who didn't make clear to Irma the importance of having the graphics in time for a presentation she was making to senior management, Lynn had not made clear to Roxanne how important it was to produce a "perfect report" for distribution to senior management. By her failure to say anything, Lynn had given Roxanne the impression that she could get away with not always doing her very best. But it was the last time she let any member of her team think so.

Not Recognizing Improvement

Acknowledging good performance doesn't have to mean big dollars. Recognition for a positive change in behavior can come in the form of

praise and other positive reinforcements. Unless you acknowledge performance improvements, no matter how small they may be, however, these small improvements aren't likely to be permanent. Nor are they likely to be followed by bigger improvements over time.

Your time commitment to getting people motivated and keeping them motivated doesn't have to be much. About ten to twenty minutes in a meeting with staff each week, on Friday afternoons, to review what the group has accomplished, should be sufficient. Such a meeting would allow you not only to celebrate staff accomplishments but also to acknowledge what individual members of the team have done—to name these staff members and be specific about their accomplishments so all can join with you in recognizing them.

Failing to Give Direction

Too often, you know your department's mission or goals, but you fail to share them with your staff. Or you might tell your employees the department's goals but then fail to keep them informed of progress toward those goals. Either kind of inaction can diminish employee motivation. Without information on department goals, your staff won't have a focus. And without any indication that they are closing in on the short-term goals and that overtime can accomplish the long-term goals, they will grow weary.

When you share your group's goals with members or, better yet, when you set them with your team as a group, you should also discuss the bigger picture: how the department's goals align with corporate goals. And at that point you also want to discuss with the group how you can keep team goals in front of members daily, like hanging progress charts that are updated daily or having a department newsletter (like Lynn's) or Monday morning meetings with coffee and Danish courtesy of the company.

Making Unrealistic Demands

You believe that you know your organization well enough to come up with a realistic solution to an employee's problem. What happens, however, if you, in your role of coach, prescribe a simplistic solution to a complex problem facing your employee or advocate a stretch goal demanding that the employee spearhead change in an organizational area

in which he or she will face only opposition? Similarly, what will occur if you give an employee a responsibility with a deadline that is totally unrealistic because your organization expects quick results? In each instance, you will lose credibility as a coach in the eyes of your employee. How do you overcome these problems?

For instance, as a manager, it might be simple for you to get Project A completed, but your employee likely doesn't have the same collegial network to do the same. When such is the case, you may have to involve yourself in the action plan to achieve the results expected. To avoid the problem entirely, each time you assign work to an employee, you need to consider the obstacles that the individual might encounter and which problems can be hurtled by the employee and those that may require you to give the employee a little push over. In such instances, that extra hand should be a part of the action plan between you and your staff member. If, in a similar vein, an effort has a very tight deadline, you need to offer your employee the needed resources to make the schedule.

If, after serious consideration, you have to admit that the task is even beyond *your* ability, then it would be totally unfair to give the responsibility to a staff member. Likewise, a goal requiring change about which the employee will face nothing but opposition. In such a circumstance, too, you might be wiser to retain that task yourself rather than demoralize someone by passing it on to him or her.

Being Impatient

Finally, coaches can easily fall into the traps of sharing their opinion too early in the feedback session or, worse, losing their patience after having explained the same task for the tenth time, learning about a stupid mistake that will cause a project setback, or reading a simple memo that needs editing.

Premature feedback may indicate to an employee that you aren't listening (remember, the 80/20 rule in which you should be listening 80 percent of the time and talking 20 percent) or, alternatively, that you have a bag full of trite answers regardless of the problem. In both instances, the solution is simple: shut up and learn to really listen.

Coaches who fail to exhibit patience send a message to their employees that they "can't believe just how stupid they are." Patience sends a very different message; it tells employees that the coach recognizes that they are human beings and, as such, they have human fallibility, yet that is no reason to quit. Employees see their boss's patience as evidence that

they believe that their staff members can succeed in their work. So they should *try again*.

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As I review the many situations I've described in this section of the book, it occurs to me that I may have given you, the reader, the wrong impression about coaching; that is, that you only coach when there's a problem. If you coach only to address a performance problem in the making, you're wasting a valuable management technique. That's because your staff members will regard meetings with you as always negative. Rather, they should come to regard coaching sessions as meetings for the purpose of growth, not punishment. Don't assume that your employees know that they are doing a good job. Use your coaching meetings as often to recognize outstanding performance as to advise an employee on how to handle a difficult situation or avoid a problem in the making.