

Coaching for Performance

by Dennis Roberts

Improving skills and behaviour is the key to bettering employee performance and the results they produce, says Dennis Roberts, but achieving this is not straightforward when you are dealing with emotional as well as rational beings.

Lawyers, accountants and management consultants share one thing in common they are all professional advisors. They are paid for their opinion. The interpretation of legislation, whether it be black or white, is a far cry from the skills required to lead and manage teams of people.

Coaching is now a highly popular leadership methodology. In its most simple form coaching is self directed learning, It is a learning loop revolving around creating insight and taking action. But here is the rub - it is the coachee's insights and actions that form the learning agenda. The challenge for many professionals in leading and managing people is to refrain from advising or solving the coachee's problems. It can take practice especially if there is ego involved.

The most popular modality of executive coaching is Coaching for Performance. Traditionally key performance indicators (KPI's) revolve around objectives, targets or results. The notion of management by objectives is the cornerstone of commercial organisations worldwide. What happens if you don't meet your targets? The old dictatorial school suggested you keep your head down and tail up and work harder or if that failed change strategies and then work harder.

All of this begs the question, what drives results? The Coaching for Performance framework shifts the focus from results to performance. It is performance that drives results. Do enough of the right things or the things rights and you will get results. Balanced Scorecard theorists, Kaplan and Norton write of lead and lag indicators. In a similar vein lead indicators can, and should, be used as predictive measures of future success. If these predictive measures indicate things are not on track then remedial action can be taken quickly. Time is money.



Traditional management reporting concentrates on lag indicators, eg sales, billable hours, customers, profit. By the time reports are produced the damage has often been done. Remedial action may lag by 30-60 days.

So, if we accept that performance drives results, it begs the next question - what drives performance? There are two things that drive performance - SKILLS and BEHAVIOUR. In a high performance culture employees will be measured on both. The specialist coach may assist with:

Conducting training needs analysis

The basic rule of coaching is 'work with what's there' so if you or your firm has already invested in 360 degree questionnaires, diagnostic surveys, psych profiles, performance reviews or any relevant skills based training program then engage your coach to ensure you obtain a return on your investment. The real value is in the implementation.

Establishing a baseline

Skills are learned and can be easily assessed. The assessment should incorporate both comprehension and competency. Keep it as objective as possible. The baseline must be agreed between the two parties.

Setting performance expectations

Seek a balance between stretching the individual to a personal best and a benchmark organisational/industry standard. A coaching program is far more effective than a classroom training program. The learning agenda can be customised and rapid rates of sustainable improvement achieved. The coach will challenge and stretch the client beyond levels they would achieve on their own.

Facilitate ACTION and INSIGHT

The iterative process of DO-LEARN and LEARN-DO forms the nucleus of the learning loop. Adult learning theorists suggest that we learn best by doing. To fast track your personal and professional development your coach will engage you in role plays and have you reflect on what worked or didn't work in your skills application from 'live in the field'.

Coaching for Performance is both an art and a science. There is a lot more to it than your ability to learn a skill and practice it. The major impediment to your success is yourself. Best summed up by the phrase, "I have seen the enemy and it lays within." Self defeating behaviour or self sabotage is the most common obstacle to personal success.

Behaviour is about choices. These choices can be made consciously or subconsciously. Some coaches are trained and skilled in behavioural coaching. It is the responsibility of the coach to know their own limitations and when they are out of their depth. Mild dysfunctional behaviours like procrastination may be dealt by bringing the choices to the cognitive awareness of the coachee. In more severe cases like an addiction an alternate modality may be necessary.

Behaviours tend to run in patterns and the patterns often run subconsciously. So in behavioural coaching the first step may simply be to bring the pattern to the conscious level and attempt to interrupt the pattern cognitively. This can be a quick and effective means of resolving minor dysfunctional behaviour.

The field of neuro linguistic programming (NLP) is based on a study of behavioural patterns. The good news is that the behaviour that runs in patterns includes both the productive and unproductive behaviours. NLP is the science of unlocking the patterns of behaviour in successful people. So, the things that you did to get you where you are today can be repeated to help drive further successes. It is not just about bad behaviours repeating, good behaviours repeat too!

Resolving Conflict

One of the most challenging skills for managers and leaders is conflict resolution. Why? Because it incorporates both the logical and emotional hemispheres. Perhaps John Gray was right, men are from Mars and women are from Venus. The thing that is most confused with conflict resolution is whether the person is coming from a place of logic or emotion.

To determine whether a person is logical or emotional requires some deft footwork. It requires advanced listening skills. You are listening for the undercurrent of what is both being said and not said. Only 7% of what we communicate is verbal communication with the rest being tone of voice and body language. It is essential to hear and read these non verbal clues.

The biggest tip I can give you is if the person is acting emotionally or irrationally then you cannot solve the problem. Why? Because (a) it's not yours to solve and (b) problems are the domain of rational thinking. Problems can only be solved when you are rational. The thing to do with emotions is to express them and empathise with them. Don't try to solve them.

Aside from trying to solve emotional issues from a logical perspective (DON'T) the other trap is to suppress your emotions. It is absolutely essential that emotions have an outlet to be expressed appropriately and I stress appropriately. Running around the office abusing staff is not appropriate.

Resolving conflict is not for the faint hearted. You must be firm in drawing the line of acceptable conduct. It won't do your cause any good if you don't abide by your own code of conduct!

What I have highlighted here is the last resort. If you are confronting a performance issue then several rounds of constructive feedback may have taken place beforehand. Please do consult your Human Capital specialists for guidance.

Giving Constructive Feedback

Ken Blanchard in "The One Minute Manager" once wrote "Catch people doing things right". Staff need constructive feedback for the things they do right as much as the things that aren't effective.

Constructive feedback is much more than simply a pat on the back and saying "Well done." It is about setting the context for what you are about to say and identifying a specific behaviour or skill that you witnessed and the implication of that skill or behaviour.

Here is an example of how to practice the skill of Giving Constructive Feedback.

Coach: "Tony, I'd like to give some feedback on yesterday's meeting so that we are both clear on your performance expectations. I noticed that you didn't bring business cards, sales agreement or copies of the client's file to the meeting and as a result the client has gone cold on the deal and I came away feeling like you weren't prepared. What have to say?"

Tony: "Yeah, you're right I left the file in the office and hadn't looked at it since our last meeting. I wasn't well prepared. I'm sorry about that."

Coach: "What will you do to ensure you are adequately prepared for future meetings?"

Tony: "I'll review my diary first thing in the mornings and leave the files I need for the day on my desk."

Coach: "Ok, so let me recap. I invited you in today to give you feedback on yesterday's meeting so that we're clear about my expectations. I shared with you that I believed you weren't prepared and as a result the client went cold on the deal. You agreed with my observation and committed to reviewing your diary and putting your files on your desk for the day. Is that correct?"

Tony: "Yes, that's it."

Coach: "Tony, I know what you are capable of when you put your mind to it. So do as you suggest and let's sit down again a week from today and review your progress."

Things for you to do

Are you interested in championing a high performance culture for you or your firm? Here are a few things for you to do.

1. Practice acknowledging your support staff (using constructive feedback) for demonstrating the kind of behaviour you expect from them, eg being proactive, working back late, going above and beyond the call of duty, covering staff absentees.
2. Benchmark your own performance. Choose a skill you would like to improve, eg time management, negotiation, report writing, stress management. Break it down into five (5) core elements. Rate yourself. Set a performance target and timeframe. Periodically sit and reflect on how well you are doing and what you learned. Commit to take action. Repeat.
3. Choose a self-defeating behaviour, eg procrastination, fear of failure, over controlling. Play the events out in your mind. What choices and trigger points did you make. What could you have done differently? What do you commit to do differently next time. Remember half the battle is to be consciously aware of your choices. When you next have to deal with an emotional colleague or relationship partner refrain from problem solving.
4. Stop and listen for the underlying emotion. Resist the temptation to say, "I understand." You don't understand emotions (that's a logical process) you can only empathise with them. Ask "How does that feel?" and listen, listen and listen some more. Feel the difference.

Athletes have long embraced the notion of personal best. Results such as Olympic gold will only come to you if you commit to the learning loop of action and insight and striving to become more. Even the best athletes engage a coach, shouldn't you?



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