You know who they are. The executives or managers down the hall or across the parking lot that everybody seems to love to work for. Somehow their people always end up getting the plum assignments. And the CEO loves them because they always seem to have the best people working for them, people who end up going places in the company.

Secretly, you feel jealous. Every so often you'll overhear one of your own employees whispering to a friend, "I'd give my right arm to be working for them."

If one of your people does leave your group to go work for one of "them," you feel angry. After all, you're a nice person. You give your people good assignments and then leave them alone to do their work. Why aren't you more popular? More important, why don't you achieve breakthrough business results?

The answers to these questions may not lie in what you are doing, but in what you are not doing. Managers who coach and who actively help their employees learn and grow are seen by their employees and others as leaders who make significant contributions. They are superior business contributions. They are superior business managers who coach not just to be altruistic, but to generate business results. They often have lower than expected turnover in their ranks, except when employees leave to step up to more significant role along their career paths. Other employees want to work for coaching managers because they believe, rightly, that working for a coaching manager will ultimately enhance their careers.

The True Meaning of Coaching

The Purpose of coaching is to encourage learning, not necessarily to encourage compliance or imitation. When employees have performance problems, they are targets for a fair amount of criticism, even if humanely delivered. In many cases, the best that managers can hope for is compliance: Here is what you have to do to succeed, here is how you are doing (feedback), now close the gap. Feedback aimed solely at eliciting compliance is not coaching. Compliance doesn't necessarily help people learn, improve their capabilities to utilize knowledge, and/or execute actions more effectively now or in the future.

What Do Coaching Managers Do?

Coaching managers exist at all levels in the organization and can be found in every function from engineering to manufacturing, from marketing to human resources. These are some of their most important characteristics and responsibilities:

They have a coaching mindset.
How Coaching Can Enhance Your Brand As A Manager
by James M. Hunt and Joseph Weintraub

They get a clear sense of what can be gained by leading a group that is engaged in learning about how to work more effectively. They believe that they will be more successful by building a better organization, not by only focusing on results. (Although these managers do get results, they also focus on how results are achieved.)

Once they are clear about the need to help their people keep learning, they then hit the real truth: People can't be forced to learn. One would hope that managers have hired the right people, people who want to learn what the manager wants them to learn. But this isn't always the case. You can't coach everyone. Many coaching managers say that a key aspect of their work is making sure that the right people are in the right jobs. They are open to employees telling them that they are in the wrong role, the wrong group, or even the wrong company. They usually try to help those individuals find roles to which they are well suited. Coaching managers focus their efforts on those who do want to learn what will help them and their group.

They create a coaching-friendly context.

If people are punished for making honest mistakes or are discouraged from being open with their questions and concerns, coaching won't mean much. Sometimes it takes a great deal of work not to punish, even subtly, an employee who does something wrong. As one manager noted, "You can't say with one breath, what did you learn from that? and in the next breath chew the employee out." If you want to encourage learning, you have to cope with the frustration you may feel knowing that you could have done it better, faster, or cheaper yourself. If you are coaching, you need to try and stay on the sidelines.

Coaching, however, is only one tool. Even coaching managers sometimes have to take charge of a situation to prevent a disaster. On balance, however, they try not to do that. They put as much responsibility on their employees as possible, and then try to help them be successful.

Many coaching managers are very open with their employees. They are clear about the fact that they are going to coach. They orient new employees to their management style. They also encourage their employees to coach them.

They ask good questions, and then they listen.

Coaching managers don't jump in with feedback—at least not right away. They use good questions to encourage others to reflect on the situation and assess themselves. One manager described how "you learn the most amazing things when you get them to think about how they are doing. I have people who come up with far better ideas about what they are doing right and wrong than I could, and I consider myself a pretty observant manager."
Listening does require that the coaching manager have a certain tolerance for silence. If you ask someone a tough question, you have to give that person time to think and respond. You also have to respect the answer. Listening conveys that respect.

Some managers worry about how to design good coaching questions, but they can actually be quite simple. Basic formulations are best:

- What were you trying to do? What were you hoping to accomplish?
- What did you actually accomplish?
- How do you understand the gaps?
- What do you need to keep going, start doing, or stop doing next time?

Of course, the questions need to be modified to fit the situation, but routine questions create a disciplined approach to reflection and learning. You don't have to be super-creative to coach.

*They provide feedback that helps.*

Feedback should be timely and clear. Coaching feedback also should be directed at what the learner is working on. It should be offered to help, not to dictate a solution. The assumption here is that the employee in question wants thoughtful help. Good and superior employees are most likely to find even tough feedback helpful.

*They stick with it.*

Learning is serious business. When employees say they want to become better at something, such as managing a customer interface, and if their mastery of that skill or task will help the group, the coaching manager will look for coaching moments to help further their development. The coaching manager knows what employees are working on. This doesn't necessarily mean that they have each employee prepare a written development plan. Some coaching managers do; others don't. But both employees and the coaching manager should always know what the employees are working on.

These are some of the things that coaching managers strive to do while they are pushing for business results. How would you like to work for such a manager, regardless of your current position? Some CEOs might recognize the behavior described here as that of a high-performing board member. Some first-time managers who were lucky enough to have had a coaching manager early in their careers will recognize these characteristics in the behavior of the person who got them off to a good start. The principles appear to be the same, regardless of level in the organization.
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Enhancing Your Brand as a Manager

Your brand represents how others know you. Because coaching managers are relatively rare, they become well known in their social worlds. If you get a reputation as a coaching manager and people want to work for you, what will be the impact?

Consider what it would be like to be able to pick the members of your team from a large pool of employees who are motivated to learn and succeed. Consider the potential impact of such highly motivated individuals on your business processes and results. Consider whether being known as a developer of talent could help you build influence with other managers. Most managers would love to have such a reputation. Because coaching is relatively rare, coaching managers appear to have a competitive advantage, at least for now. There is more, however.

Many coaching managers say that it was only by developing a sense of the role of coach that they were able to let go and stay involved at the same time. Business writers and thought leaders from Douglas MacGregor to Jack Welch have been encouraging managers to let go and empower their employees, to push responsibility down where it belongs. Unfortunately, such admonitions also sometimes include the phrase "and get out of the way." Coaching managers instinctively and rightly know that that doesn't work. A manager cannot abdicate responsibility. So what should be done?

A coaching mindset helps you stay in touch with what is happening while helping your employees achieve great things for themselves and the organization. Asking the right questions encourages employees to think and take ownership, yet also gives you, as a manager, the opportunity to let employees know what you're thinking. Asking the right questions also helps you learn about what is going wrong—and right—throughout the organization.

One coaching manager, someone who has created a great deal of trust in his organization, sends an e-mail to all project participants at the end of each engagement. The e-mail says, "Tell us three things that went well, and three things that didn't go well, and three things that you have learned from the last project." E-mails come in from participants all over the world, and he distills the information and sends it back out to everyone else. He and his team then hold coaching discussions, as needed, on good learning opportunities and important problems. This coaching manager is known as a worldwide resource in his area, because his knowledge of customers and business processes is so deep.
Will coaching enhance your brand in every firm? Although there are some companies that value the kind of coaching described here, senior management of other firms may not care whether you as a manager are effective at developing talent. However, great coaching managers can be found in even the most hostile developmental environments. The word still gets out. Employees still want to work for them, and they still get good business results. And of course, good business results will help you build your brand as a manager in even the most difficult settings.

This article is abstracted from: "How Coaching Can Enhance Your Brand as a Manager" by James M. Hunt and Joseph Weintraub, published in the Journal of Organizational Excellence, Spring 2002.

For more information on how you can “enhance your brand” contact Cynthia Calluori:

Cynthia Calluori & Associates Inc.
Tel: 416-410-7914
Email: Cynthia@calluoriassociates.com