Leveraging Coaching as a Catalyst for Successful Leadership

By Jessica Roper

Introduction and Problem Statement

Leadership is a complex subject, and for decades, researchers have studied key factors and developed models to define its effectiveness and impact. While the overall objectives of organizations—achieving goals, boosting profitability to advance their missions—have largely stayed constant over the years, the techniques and approaches used by leaders to attain these objectives have undergone a considerable transformation. Considering the nuanced nature of leadership, coupled with the perpetually evolving world of work, effective leadership persists as both a subject of ongoing study and a foundation of success for any organization.

Substantial research into leadership first began during the industrial revolution, where the prevailing belief was that leaders were inherently born and not made. The ideal leader was perceived as a traditional authoritarian figure who issued directives and delegated tasks with limited employee involvement.

As research progressed into the 1960s and 70's, there was a growing consideration of the situations and environments in which leaders operate, highlighting a people-focused approach. Employee engagement became a cornerstone for companies, and the significance of employee input in the problem solving and decision-making processes increased. This shift was particularly pronounced in the late 1990s and early 2000s, driven by rapid technological advancements and cultural shifts.

This evolving landscape prompted the need for new techniques and strategies in leadership as the definition of leadership transitioned from a 'top down' process to a more intricate understanding of the interactions among the leader, followers, and situations. (Benmira S, Agboola M, 2021).

While leadership roles across industries and organizations differ in day-to-day tasks and objectives, at its core, quality leadership always encompasses clear communication, empathy, adaptability, and guiding others to a shared goal.

Given the modern complexities leaders face, a crucial question emerges: How can leaders enhance their effectiveness, achieve goals and outcomes, and maintain team cohesion in a dynamic environment?

With all the various leadership theories, techniques, and strategies available today, one that stands out is coaching. Coaching is an empirically validated approach that aims to develop employees and help them achieve goals. It provides leaders with a dependable strategy for handling various challenges while encouraging employees to actively engage in their own personal development.

Background of coaching

Coaching, as a discipline, has a diverse background across various fields, including sports, psychology, health, and management. Its origins can be traced back to ancient philosophers, most notably Socrates, who employed the Socratic method, characterized by open-ended questions and self-reflection.

In the 20th century, coaching gained prominence as the self-help and personal development movements surged. Influential figures like Dale Carnegie and Napoleon Hill, who were active in the early 1900s, played a key role in this development. During the 1970's, sports coaching, led by innovators like Timothy Gallwey, introduced coaching methodologies that extended beyond sports. Gallwey's approach was so effective that he found himself addressing business leaders and executives, showcasing coaching's broader applicability beyond sports (Whitmore, J. 2002). This momentum continued throughout the 1980's and 90's with figures like Tony Robbins, known for life coaching and Stephen Covey, who wrote "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People," which influenced the world of business with the concept that one must change their fundamental beliefs and assumptions rather than only changing behaviors. These developments and insights heightened the awareness of coaching's impact amongst business leaders and created business environments ripe for coaching.

In 1995, The International Coach Federation (ICF) was established by a group of coaching professionals committed to establishing coaching as a credible and recognized profession. While several coaching organizations existed before the ICF, each playing a part in shaping the field, the ICF distinguished itself by taking the lead in defining coaching competencies, establishing a code of ethics, conducting valuable research, and introducing the first level of coach certification. This effort laid the foundation for the development of formal coaching training programs. As a result, demand for coaching increased as organizations embraced these programs, solidifying coaching as an in-demand field and a critical component of leadership.

Coaching within leadership: How coaching can improve outcomes

Coaching, used as a tool within leadership, involves partnering with an individual to help them reach their goals. It allows individuals to identify both short- and long-term goals, providing a pathway for leader and

employee to focus on achieving those milestones together. It also serves to improve performance, develop skill sets and enhance personal growth, which can have significant performance results.

One specific advantage of coaching is that it empowers individuals by involving them in the process, which can lead to increased self-confidence and self-efficacy. This practice isn't just theoretical. Research indicates that participants who undergo developmental coaching display higher levels of self-efficacy, a pivotal factor for career progression and sustained personal and professional development.

Coaching yields rewards for the leader as well. Embracing a coaching role sharpens vital leadership traits, such as communication, empathy, and adaptability. Coaching puts the leader in the position of being an influential mentor, and it underscores the investment in their team's development and success. This commitment contributes to improved employee satisfaction and retention, and it builds stronger, more cohesive teams.

Various studies have emphasized the benefits of coaching, both for individuals and organizations. Notably, research conducted at a Fortune 500 company found that 77% of respondents reported that coaching had a significant impact on at least one of nine business measures. In addition, it was observed that overall productivity and employee satisfaction saw positive effects. (Anderson, M. 2002) Similarly, a 2009 ICF study indicated that 96% of coaching clients reported they would repeat the experience.

Implementing a coaching approach

There are numerous coaching frameworks available, each with its own strategies and techniques. You can think of them as recipe cards guiding coaching conversations. Much like skilled chefs who blend various techniques and ingredients, coaches customize different methods and tools to align with an individual's needs.

Here are some universally applicable coaching elements that span frameworks and can be customized and implemented according to your circumstances.

Practice active listening

At first, this might seem like common sense, but active listening goes beyond just hearing. It requires giving your full and undivided attention. To do this, you may need to create a quiet environment with no distractions, like pinging phones or other interruptions. Allow enough time for the conversation, and use verbal and nonverbal cues like eye contact, smiling, nodding and affirming phrases like, "Go on" and "I see." Also, paraphrase or summarize what you hear to ensure your understanding.

Ask powerful questions that encourage self-reflection

Pose open-ended questions that invite your employee to explore thoughts, aspirations, and challenges. It is a good idea to have a few questions ready before the meeting to get the conversation flowing. From there, your active listening will enable you to ask clarifying and follow-up questions throughout the conversation.

Collaborate on creating goals and action plans

Use insights from your employee's reflection to collaborate on defining goals. It is important to engage them in this process, so encourage them to take the reins and define their next steps and action plans. The SMART strategy for developing goals (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound) can help guide you.

Provide feedback and accountability

Once a goal is defined, it's crucial to provide consistent feedback that acknowledges the employee's efforts and highlights areas for improvement. This ongoing dialogue not only fuels growth but also fosters a sense of trust and continuous improvement. Establish specific times when your employees can reflect on their progress, and you can reinforce your commitment to their development.

Putting coaching into action: A real-life example

Let's explore a real-life scenario that demonstrates coaching in action.

Imagine you're a manager at a tech company and oversee a promising employee named Ryan. He has great technical skills but is hesitant in meetings and reluctant to take on additional tasks. You've identified a potential lack of confidence.

As the leader, it's your role to approach Ryan. Given your understanding of the situation, it might be tempting to take a direct approach, advising Ryan to become more vocal during meetings and to assume more responsibilities to enhance his confidence and demonstrate his capabilities.

While this approach has good intent, it assumes the leader knows what the problem is and how to fix it and does not involve any collaboration or input from Ryan. This can lead to an environment ripe for defensiveness, miscommunication, and misaligned goals.

Instead, consider how coaching techniques like powerful questioning, self-reflection and collaborative goal-setting could transform the conversation.

"Ryan, I've noticed that you're not engaging in meetings, you're showing hesitancy in areas where you have ample knowledge, and you're passing up new opportunities presented to you. With the aim of supporting your growth, I'm interested in learning more about your perspective and how you're feeling at work. This might involve me asking you some questions to grasp the situation better, and then, collaboratively, we can set goals to enhance your performance. How does that sound to you?"

In this approach, collaboration takes center stage. Rather than dictating what Ryan should do, you're using coaching dialogue and even seeking his permission, which creates a safe and open space for him to share.

Once you gain Ryan's agreement to a coaching conversation, you can pose open-ended questions to better understand the situation and encourage him to reflect:

- What situations do you find challenging when working with others? Could you describe your thoughts in those instances?
- What aspects of your job excite you, and which ones cause uncertainty or hesitation? Why do you think that is?
- How do you think boosting your confidence could impact your career positively?

Once you have a clear understanding of the situation, you can define goals together with Ryan. For instance, if you discover it is in fact a lack of self-confidence that's affecting his performance, you might ask, "What's one step you can take to enhance your self-confidence?" Use the response to craft a goal, such as:

"Ryan will take the lead on the software upgrade project. Over the next six months, he'll contribute to team meetings by sharing progress and obstacles. He will pinpoint ideas before the meeting to feel more confident when sharing. We'll have biweekly follow-up sessions to reflect on his goal progress and track his advancement."

This goal follows the SMART criteria, making it specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound, ensuring a clear and achievable pathway for Ryan's growth and inviting the opportunity for additional coaching conversations during his progress meetings.

Conclusion

Although coaching is a powerful tool, it isn't a one-time fix. Instead, it represents an ongoing journey. The most effective coaches are willing to jump in, learn and adapt. Different individuals require different approaches, and sometimes it takes trial and error to learn what works. Successful coaching is a two-way partnership. If someone is resistant, uncertain or hesitant, it may require time to nurture the relationship and establish trust. In such scenarios, seeking opportunities to deepen your understanding of the coachee and soliciting feedback on how best to support them can aid in the development of a coaching partnership over time.

Coaching does not require perfection, but it does require a partnership built on honesty, communication, and trust. And, as with any skill, the more you practice coaching, the more proficient and impactful you'll become as a leader.

References

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Jessica Roper is the director of Career Services at University of Phoenix, where she leads a team of career advisors serving students and alumni in their career planning. She is passionate about mentorship and coaching and driven by helping others succeed in their careers. Jessica is an active member of the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE). She actively mentors through the UOPX women's employee resource group and the Arizona Foundation for Women She Leads program. Her love of reading has inspired her to venture into writing, where she is eager to share her insights about the latest workforce trends as well as leadership guidance and advice. Jessica earned her Bachelor of Arts in communication from Arizona State University and her MBA with University of Phoenix.