

# WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A “COACH” IN THE WORKPLACE?

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The word “coach” has recently been used in organizations to describe a new role for managers and supervisors that is consistent with new concepts of participative-team management based on cooperation and agreement. Providing “coaching” has also come to mean a process of more closely supervising a problem performer. When pressed for more than a label, those advocating “coaching” often fall back on the athletic team metaphor – good coaches, they say, act like famous coaches of winning football or basketball teams. While this metaphor may be glamorous, it fails to specify the actions that would be relevant and helpful to those who wish to be good coaches in the organizational workplace.

This paper describes twenty-one specific actions that can be used by those who want to serve as a coach in their management role. These actions rest on the assumption that managers and supervisors performing as coaches are effective in the degree that they **add value** to the performance of the executives, managers, and staff they are coaching. There are two ways by which coaches can add value to their organizational clients: by **leading** and by **supporting** the clients.

## WHAT COACHES DO TO ADD VALUE AS A LEADER:

### 1. Coaches provide a positive example in all aspects of performance.

The role model remains as one of the most powerful sources of learning even after we have grown from a child into adulthood. Coaches in the workplace are providing lessons, for good or ill, for all who observe their behavior. If coaches want goal-centered commitment, enthusiasm, and honesty from their staff, they must demonstrate commitment, enthusiasm, and honesty in their own behavior. Whatever values their behaviors demonstrate are the lessons they are sending, for good or ill, to all who are watching.

### 2. Coaches provide clarity about the goals that are to be achieved and a detailed picture or vision of what the situation will look like when the goals have been accomplished well.

Coaches make the personal effort to become clear in their own minds and deeply understand the organization’s goals and vision. With personal clarity, coaches then communicate their understanding to others by sharing vivid descriptions of outcomes, telling stories of how things will be when success has been achieved, giving specific details about the goals and objectives that must be accomplished to fulfill the vision, and detailing how others can contribute to making the vision reality.

**3. Coaches facilitate others in becoming aligned with and committed to the goals and vision.**

Coaches make it easy for others to see how their personal goals and the goals of the organization are mutually supportive. They do this by understanding the goals of others, relating them to the organization's goals, and clearly explaining that relationship. Coaches help to develop commitment in others for achieving performance goals and use both personal challenge and organizational accountability for results as goads to high achievement.

**4. Coaches help others to control themselves, to focus their energy on their work, and to feel empowered to use their talents and skills to the maximum possible extent on behalf of the goals and vision.**

Coaches see to it that people have the opportunity to gain and maintain the technical competence they need to perform their work. Coaches enable people to control the pace and style of their own work to achieve both maximum effectiveness and efficiencies. People are considered to be accountable for their results rather than their activities. Coaches encourage people to use *all* of their capacities on behalf of achieving results rather than simply conforming to job descriptions and role boundaries.

**5. Coaches understand the key relationships among people and between organizational units that must be established and maintained well for effective performance.**

People need to be socially competent in relation to the work situation and to get along well with co-workers under the circumstances and pressures of the job. Coaches support positive thinking among people about others and help others to work effectively across organizational boundaries whenever necessary. Coaches help people handle the political dynamics of the work setting by working well with those in authority and selecting issues for dispute only after careful consideration of results-related concerns. Coaches work incessantly to develop trusting relationships and cooperative teamwork among staff and between units.

**6. Coaches help to establish, clarify, and enforce the norms and standards by which work is accomplished and relationships are maintained.**

Coaches recognize that norms and standards are important agreements about what constitutes acceptable behavior and adequate performance. They continuously question why things are done the way they are and seek out better ways to achieve results by constantly tinkering with the methods and procedures of the system. Coaches help others to raise the bar of accomplishment whenever possible by setting high standards for performance and measuring results by those standards.

**7. Coaches provide performance feedback to staff when necessary to close any gap that may exist between performance standards and actual behavior or results.**

When performance lags behind standards, coaches take careful note of actual behavior or results, compares them with standards, describes the gap to the staff performer, and secures their agreement to do what is necessary to close the gap. The coach is careful to leave the responsibility for performance improvement with the staff member and provides appropriate resources to help assure their success. If the staff member cannot or will not make the required improvements, the coach provides the required leadership to change the relationship between the organization and the staff member.

**8. Coaches actively involve others in planning, problem-solving, decision-making, and communicating about issues that affect them and their work.**

People need to be able to communicate adequately to understand the nature of their work and how it fits in, to solve problems as they arise, and to find resources when they need them. Coaches recognize these needs and help others to participate in the problem-solving and decision-making processes that guide the progress of work through the organization. Coaches understand that it is through active involvement in planning, problem-solving, and decision-making that people develop deep feelings of commitment to the achievement of the organization's goals. When people contribute to the authorship of those goals and the plans for achieving them, they naturally feel themselves to have a personal stake in the organization's success.

**9. Coaches secure agreements for action; build consensus when appropriate.**

Coaches realize that work is guided more effectively and creatively by agreement rather than by compliance. Therefore, coaches help people to negotiate and keep effective agreements, develop supportive allies for projects, and become comfortable and creative when working interdependently with others. Coaches select times when decisions are best made by consensus and use consensus-building techniques to develop team commitment to decisions. Coaches use their authority to authorize agreed upon action by others rather than to control the activities of others.

**10. Coaches take the initiative in repairing broken agreements, clarifying communication problems, and learning from mistakes.**

When agreements are broken, misunderstanding occur, or mistakes are made, coaches immediately and aggressively seek to fix, clarify, or learn. They do not delay in pursuing action on their own behalf, on behalf of others, or on the team's behalf. When something goes wrong, coaches focus on fixing the problem rather than on fixing the blame. They help others to do the same and get on with the work that needs to be done.

**11. Coaches organize work to assure coordination of effort (Gantt charts, flow charts, schedules, check lists, etc.)**

By creating pictures and graphs of the work plan, coaches help people to see clearly the outcomes that are to be achieved, the paths toward achieving them, and the key relationships among people and between units that will be required to be successful. Graphics, pictures, and lists help people to keep track of details, monitor progress toward goals, and understand when adjustments are necessary to maintain momentum toward success.

**12. Coaches recognize and reward people for their contributions and/or hold people accountable for their actions and attitudes.**

When planning and guiding work toward achieving organizational goals, coaches appropriately use their organizational authority to authorize the self-directed actions of others and sponsor their success. Coaches enthusiastically appreciate the work and results produced by others either individually or as members of a team. They gladly give credit where credit is due and recognize everyone's contribution to success. Coaches regard it as also appropriate to use their authority to hold individuals or groups accountable for deliberate actions that contribute to failure, for negligence or inaction when action is appropriate, or for behavior that reflects attitudes of apathy or negativity toward goals or other people after positive working agreements have been reached. Coaches realize that requiring no accountability when accountability is due has a toxic affect on all parts of the organization. Therefore, they expect responsibility from others and exact accountability when responsibility fails.

**WHAT COACHES DO TO ADD VALUE AS A SUPPORT SYSTEM:****13. Coaches understand and interpret the total system in which others work; they offer context and perspective for their work.**

Coaches understand that people want, and are entitled to meaningful work. Often work is required of people who, because they don't understand the big picture, fail to see the meaning of their work and, so, resent it or find it useless. Coaches can add great value to the work people do by putting it into the context of the big picture and thereby give it a significance that it previously lacked.

**14. Coaches support the work of others by giving them their attention with active listening.**

Coaches gain information and detailed insight into the work of others by listening to them explain their work. People often become more clear about their own work when they have the opportunity to describe it and reflect upon it with another. Results of this exchange can include fewer misunderstandings about the purposes of the work,

enhanced creativity in approaching the work, broader application of innovations, more timely allocation of resources to support work in various stages of development.

#### **15. Coaches provides the maximum possible information.**

Coaches recognize that information is the life blood of effective organizational performance. With information, staff can exercise judgement and take initiative when circumstances make that necessary. Information helps to release the energy of the staff to contribute to the goals of the system. Coaches support the work of others by telling everyone everything whenever possible (exceptions include confidential information) and let them decide what information is relevant and useful for their work.

#### **16. Coaches work to inspire confidence and trust.**

Coaches are deliberate and intentional about developing trust and mutual confidence between themselves and others and among members of the organization. Coaches understand that, without trust, there are severe limits to commitment, cooperation, information sharing, and willingness to take risks and be creative. Coaches realize that trust can never be demanded or required, only earned and engendered by ones attitudes and behaviors. Coaches begin their relationships with others from a presumption of trust rather than mistrust.

#### **17. Coaches suggest ideas, approaches, and methods for improving performance.**

Coaches offer suggestions and ideas from a different, more distant perspective, to see if others might find value in trying a new approach. Coaches rarely give unsolicited advice or directly control another's activities. Instead, coaches often offer their suggestions in the form of "what if..." questions, as stories or examples of how a similar task was once accomplished, or as a metaphor that has implications for a new approach to task achievement.

#### **18. Coaches provide developmental feedback, training, demonstrations, and mentoring.**

In high performing organizations, people want to know how they're doing, where they stand, how they can improve, and what they need to learn. To provide this information, coaches offer constant developmental feedback, in a manner that is always positive and reinforcing. They help people monitor their own learning needs and match learning resources with those needs. They provide demonstrations and the mentoring of example aimed at continuously raising performance levels. When performance is below standard, coaches move quickly to provide the "performance feedback" that describes the gap between standard and performance and offer the support necessary for the other to close the gap (see # 7 above).

**19. Coaches secure required resources.**

People are often stymied in their work by the lack of appropriate or necessary resources and their inability to secure the resources on their own. Coaches use their contacts, influence, and authority to provide the help that is needed to secure the needed resources or to help find other ways to get the job done.

**20. Coaches help to solve problems, make decisions, and authorize actions when necessary.**

There are times when people need the support of another to be creative in problem-solving, or to close on a decision. Coaches know that it is an appropriate part of their role to provide this support in a timely way without taking power away from the other. Coaches also understand that their authority is a resource available to the entire team and organization and is to be used to authorize action and release the energy of others on behalf of the organization's goals.

**21. Coaches buffer negative influences from outside sources.**

To the extent possible, coaches guard the boundaries of the team and the organization from external influences that would have the effect of damaging the organization's effectiveness. The team's coach sits at the interface between the team and the rest of the larger system. In this position, it is the coach's peculiar opportunity and responsibility to support the team by absorbing or dealing with unjustified criticism or abusive authority offered by external sources.

**T**hrough these twenty-one actions, coaches provide positive leadership and support to focus on creative achievement rather than a negative focus on avoiding mistakes. They focus on how they can release the energy of others rather than control it. They build commitment to high performance rather than require compliance with minimum standards. They give ten times more positive feedback than corrective feedback and they only correct another when it will positively impact future performance. They listen more than they tell. They learn as well as teach. They involve others as active partners in planning and decision-making. And they enjoy and take pride in their work just as they foster that in others. Coaches never substitute for players by taking responsibility for performance away from individuals or teams, yet they add value to every team's and player's performance through their own performance as a coach.

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