



Executive Coaching

Coach AND Counsel to Retain Top Producers

By Merna Skinner

If Companies know that a productive workforce improves shareholder value, why do so many neglect the coaching and counseling of their human capital? Unfortunately, many companies ignore the value of human capital — an asset that directly affects the bottom line. The high costs of rehiring and training for positions vacated by unmotivated, underutilized individuals are strong support for the need to make the employee's career growth a priority. So if managers know these skills are crucial for employee retention, why do many resist using them?

Many companies — and managers — resist coaching and counseling their staffs because they feel it is too time-consuming. They don't realize that taking the time in the short term to learn these crucial functions will pay off in the long term in increased employee satisfaction and improved performances.

Many managers put coaching and counseling in a nebulous category marked "soft skills." They know that these are important skills but often don't know when and how to use them. Coaches need to take the time to "coach themselves" by learning how to use these two skills. Like any skills, coaching and counseling demand practice and an understanding of how both approaches work together as part of ongoing employee development.

Coaching should focus on identifying opportunities for employee growth and the competencies that the employee needs to achieve them; it is straightforward, directive, and supervisor-centered. Counseling solves problems before they become unmanageable.

Working in Tandem

The two skills work in tandem. The astute manager will recognize when to shift modes from coaching to counseling. For example, a manager may identify as part of ongoing coaching a potential promotion for a staff member. Both parties discuss the opportunity and identify what skills the employee needs to secure the promotion. The employee may bring up the need for better time management skills in order to be prepared for the position.

Let's say they both begin looking at training plans and goals. During this same coaching session, the manager finds out that a large part of the employee's time management problem is not getting work done because of frequent lateness and absence from work. The manager needs to recognize this as a separate counseling issue which also needs to be dealt with but in a very different manner.

Competitive companies develop a "ladder" model of coaching that will ensure success for employer and employee alike:

- **Describe the opportunity or assignment to the employee.** Effective coaches understand the targeted task or opportunity and recognize if it is a potential match for a particular staff member. The manager needs at the outset to fully explain the opportunity and how he or she perceives it fitting into the employee's overall development program.
- **Get the employee's reaction and sell the opportunity, if necessary.** This step demands focused listening on the part of the manager. You need to get feedback on what the employee thinks of the opportunity and if he or she agrees with your proposal. Frequently, you may have to "sell" the opportunity to the employee, explaining specifically how it will benefit him or her.
- **Discuss the needed skills and competencies.** This is when both manager and employee jointly identify any additional training or skills that may be needed. Asking open-ended questions like, "What would you need help with to make this a successful venture?", or "What parts of the opportunity do you need help with?", will identify if any potential gaps in employee preparation exist.
- **Plan implementation steps.** Both manager and employee next determine what resources are available to acquire these new skills. Is it a simple technical skill that can be learned from a one-day workshop? Or is it a more subjective skill like leadership, which needs to be actively practiced, monitored, and discussed over time? Both parties should agree on specific goals, along with criteria for success and a developmental timetable.
- **Schedule a follow-up meeting.** Set key check-in points to ensure that the agreed-upon program is progressing according to plan. During these meetings, the manager should motivate and inspire the employee, giving a balanced critique of how he or she is developing. •

Merna Skinner is a partner at Exec|Comm, a New York executive communications training company.