



Coaching And Counseling: You Need To Do Both To Retain Talented Employees

By **MERNA SKINNER**

Today's reduced workforce demands that fewer employees take on more responsibilities. For managers, this means maximizing the talents and potential of their subordinates and making sure they are fulfilled and challenged by what they do day to day. Managers who focus only on giving out assignments and supervising workflow and neglect employee development will quickly lose frustrated staff-members to competitors. If they know these skills are important for employee retention, why, then, do many managers resist using them?

Many 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.

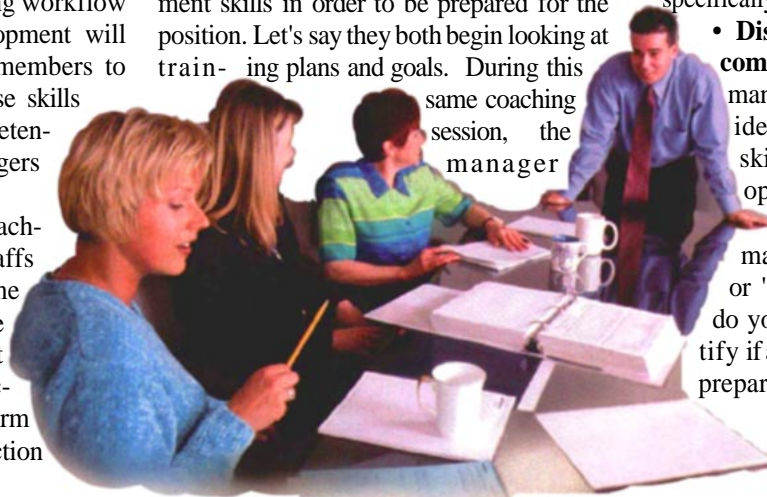
Many managers put coaching and counseling in a nebulous category marked "soft skills." They know that these are important skills but often don't know when and how to use them. Skinner reiterates the need for coaches to take the time to "coach themselves" by learning how to use these two skills. Like any skill, 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; it is employee-centered and responsive. While counseling, the supervisor listens for the employee's concerns and channels him or her into a collaborative solution. When an employee participates in finding the solution, he or she will be more likely to implement it.

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.

Effective coaching follows a logical process. Managers who use a structured system to guide employee coaching programs will find it easier than having a series of adhoc conversations. This model also sets up clear expectations and a pattern of accountability for both employee and employer. Below, the "ladder" model of coaching which 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 they perceive 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 a 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. In the case of a specific project, spend time coaching the employee on items they are still having difficulties with. You should be prepared for changes in your timetable if new skill needs arise.



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