

By Patrick Sweeney

Developing Leadership Potential Through Coaching

Statistics show that many coaching relationships fail to achieve lasting results. To be truly successful in the long term, a coaching relationship should focus less on trying to change people and more on developing their potential.

One of the most difficult challenges for new leaders is to let go of the past.

After all, it's their past that led to their promotion. Their approach to managing others and completing projects helped them to succeed and become recognized. It is what made them who they are. So it's only natural for them to assume that now is the time to do more of the same — just a little faster and a little harder. They tell themselves that they just have to play to their strengths and step on the accelerator to thrive in their new role.

And that's where most new leaders trip up. They get in their own way by not recognizing that, while their past accomplishments may be the reason they were tapped to lead, their past has little to do with how they will lead. Their future success is about their potential. The way they achieved goals in the past may actually get in the way of their success

as new leaders. And this can be a difficult concept for them to grasp.

A Real Connection

To coach new leaders through this transition requires a real connection between the leader and the coach. That is a very complicated formula.

Both need to have seven things going on simultaneously. They need to be open, flexible, intrigued by solving problems, self-aware, willing to listen and reflect and, most importantly, both need to be convinced that the change they want is worth everything it will take to bring it about.

Change is very hard. We often do everything we can to avoid changing. It means work and leaving our comfort zones. The real motivation to change has to come from within. Otherwise, nothing will change, at least not for very long.

The best advice in the world will fall on deaf ears if one of two people is not ready: the coach or the person being coached. That accounts for a very complicated formula, times two.

Before we delve into the most effective ways to coach, let's spend a moment addressing a fundamental question: Does anyone really change? We can all change in huge ways if we really want to. But it is not the leader's job to try to change people. Rather, the leader's job is to help people realize their potential. Those are two very different things.

Trying to change someone, to make them other than what they really are, is fruitless. We might get someone to pretend to listen to us or even follow our rules, but it will be, as they say in late-night commercials, for a limited time only. As coaches, we are there to identify and develop potential.

Coaching Without Desired Results

When we coach executives on how to become better coaches themselves — how to improve the performance of their key employees — after each session, they say they are committed to going back to their jobs and applying what they've learned.

But a year later, when we go back and ask their direct reports to confirm that these leaders applied the lessons, more than one-third say their bosses are doing absolutely nothing differently. Why did more than one-third of the executives go through the coaching, promise to implement the changes but do nothing about it?

Most of them just get sucked into their busy lives, get distracted by the day-to-day demands of their jobs and forget to implement what they learned. We are all creatures of habit. We fall back on old habits, both good and bad. It's easier to repeat old patterns: That's our comfort zone. Coaching, which is about changing, falls by the wayside.

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To change, we have to want to. Most of us don't change unless our back is against the wall. Often we only change after we are hurting in some way. And we have to be ready to hurt some more because changing can be painful. It starts with understanding that there is a gap between our existing state and where we need to go.

Recipe for Coaching Success

Understanding is just the starting point to effective coaching, and we need to bridge the gap between understanding and doing. Most coaching is based on a huge, and false, assumption: If people understand, they will do the right thing.

But why do so many people who have had a triple bypass operation, a year later resume their old eating habits? If we aren't going to change when something is life-threatening, then why would we change a work habit just because our boss wants us to?

For coaching to stick, it requires desire, understanding, commitment, support, being open to feedback and constant follow-up. Not everyone can handle it, or even wants to.

Who Is Coachable?

When it comes to coaching, the real question you should ask is: Who is coachable? Who is truly interested in improving? Who has the flexibility, the openness, the self-awareness and the desire to change? That's who coaching will stick to.

If they are truly interested in reaching out to others and reaching into themselves, they can change. Those are the individuals who have the potential to become the next leaders and make a difference to the organization's future.

There is a huge difference between trying to change people and helping them realize their potential. Coaches can only help people tap into their leadership potential if they have the desire and they share a natural connection. Only then will they want to hear from the coach. The coach's attention will keep them engaged and feeling valued. That by itself will send two distinct messages throughout the organization.

First and foremost, it will let everyone know who and what the organization values. Equally important, the coach's time will be spent wisely, and as he or she gets to know top performers better, will recognize the qualities that make them special. The coach also will gain insights into what is working for the company and will have a clearer understanding of what to look for when it's time to hire the next leaders.

How does a coach establish a connection? It is only natural for us to want to work with people who we like, and we tend to like people who are most like ourselves.

Feeling close with someone with whom you have so much in common, for better or worse, is just part of human nature. So without being conscious of it, we often end up hiring and promoting people who remind us of ourselves, or at least with whom we have much in common.

We end up saying, "There's something about that person I really like. I'm not quite sure exactly what it is. But they remind me of someone I'm very fond of. Let's see. Who could it be? Oh, yeah, it's me." Of course, we don't want to surround ourselves with people who get on our nerves. But if you surround yourself with an entire staff of people just like you, you will inevitably create an unbalanced organization.

We have to remember that a staff with all of our strengths and virtues will also share our faults and shortcomings. So they will help us stay right where we are, not help us grow to where we need to be.

Realize also that it can be easier for us to coach those with whom we share much in common.

A truly impactful coach needs to move beyond comfort zones to connect on a new level. Sometimes, if the coach connects too much with someone he or she is trying to coach, the coach can lose objectivity and, therefore, the ability to be effective.

How can a coach help new leaders find their true voices? Start out by understanding the strengths of the individual being coached. Coaching is a one-to-one activity. Find a way to connect strongly with the individual, whether it's through a desire to succeed, optimism or empathy.

Begin by letting the individual know the coach is aware of his or her strengths. Explain that coaching is about tapping into those strengths and helping develop them.

Insights into their strengths can be fostered by a 360-degree evaluation, in which colleagues, managers and direct reports share insights into how the individual is perceived. An in-depth personality profile can also provide the coach and the individual being coached with a deeper understanding of where these strengths come from.

Perhaps the individual has a need to be the smartest person in the room. Maybe he or she is too disagreeable. What is the most important thing the individual needs to change to become a more effective leader? That has to be identified and agreed to.

With that understanding, the coach can create an individual development plan with realistic goals and time frames. We can change one thing at a time, with focus, drive, desire, support and follow-through.

Whatever the challenge that needs to be overcome, coaches can only help after they are able to forge a meaningful connection with the individual being coached. It is their genuine connection that will allow the person to be receptive to coaching and lay the foundation for long-term success.

Change ultimately is about envisioning a better future. We all want to connect with someone who believes in us and someone with whom we can let down our guard and be our true selves. That's the place where coaching becomes real.

The best coaches know each of the individuals they are working with and help them connect with themselves, giving them the confidence to lead with their unique styles. As a coach, we are dealing in a personal realm. It's that place where the professional and the personal connect.

Coaching is about changing, and changing is about being focused, self-aware, open and truly desiring a different future. ■

About Caliper

Patrick Sweeney is President of Caliper, an international management consulting firm.

Headquartered in Princeton, with a dozen offices around the world, Caliper consults with executives on hiring, employee development, team building and organizational performance. Throughout the past four decades, Caliper has assessed the potential of over two million individuals for Johnson & Johnson, Avis and some of the fastest growing smaller companies around the world.