

# What is coaching and how does it relate to management?

Cristina Bianchi – 30 March 2010

The International Coach Federation (ICF) defines coaching as ‘partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential.’ As a coach, I can only agree with such a definition. However, for my clients this might not be enough. What is coaching concretely? How does it work in practice?

In my experience as coach, I have come to the conclusion that a distinction must be made between delivering coaching as an outside consultant and a manager in the workplace who uses coaching as a management and communication style in his daily interactions with his team.

## The consultant coach

As a consultant, I define coaching as the process of accompanying an individual in the search for answers around an issue or a goal which is perceived by that individual as being worth clarifying, and/or pursuing. This is achieved by the coach mainly through questioning, active listening, and challenging assumptions. Occasionally, and when appropriate, the coach proposes alternative routes as to how to tackle that issue, which the person being coached (the coachee) might decide to pursue or not. The coachee, therefore, retains control of the process and where this process might lead. The coach is a vehicle through which the coachee’s learning process is accelerated and facilitated.

All this can more easily be achieved when the coachee enters the coaching process on his own initiative, having decided that coaching is his approach of choice to move forward. In this case the relationship between the coach and the coachee is not influenced by any other stakeholder, and the coachee is free to pursue his own learning objectives without any interference.

When the coachee is referred to the coach by his company, the coaching relationship gains a third stakeholder, the sponsor, usually represented by HR or the coachee’s manager. The sponsor will probably have expectations about the coaching process as well as the development goals for the coachee, which might possibly, but not necessarily, coincide with the coachee’s own development goals. To avoid a conflict of interests, each individual agenda has to be openly discussed during one or two preliminary sessions with the coach and with the sponsor and the coachee present simultaneously. The goal is to ensure alignment between the coachee’s own learning objectives and the sponsor’s learning objectives for the coachee. Without this alignment, the coaching process may have a reduced chance of success.



Even with the sponsor as one of the main stakeholders in the coaching relationship, the ultimate goal of the consultant coach is to ensure that the coachee takes full responsibility for his own learning and development. Indeed, part of a professional coach's attitude and behaviour is to step back and let the coachee explore and arrive at his own answers. Usually, the more the coach abstains from sharing his opinions, and giving the coachee direct assistance and advice, the greater is the coachee's learning.

What then are the implications if the coach is also the coachee's manager?

### Coaching as a management style

A manager's ability to reach his corporate goals is very dependent upon the results of his team as a whole. Even if it were possible or desirable for the manager to have all of the answers, the consequences of a team's over-reliance on its manager's knowledge or inclination to share such knowledge might be detrimental to the team's growth and long term achievements. This practice is in fact likely to lead to dependency, lack of initiative, a low sense of responsibility, perhaps even de-motivation and disempowerment. Consequently, the manager needs to consider very carefully the approach and management style to be used with his team.

It is now commonly accepted that an effective manager should have a palette of different approaches (from directive to delegating) to choose from according to the situation, the task at hand and the level of expertise and motivation of the team member involved in such a situation<sup>1</sup>. More often than not, knowing which style to use and when can represent a real challenge for the manager.

Why should coaching be one of the possible choices?

Some managers may be reluctant to apply a coaching style precisely because their performance depends upon the performance of their team members and they may be cautious about not retaining full control of all aspects of the task. Understandably, the manager may choose not to use a coaching style when the team member is inexperienced and there is some urgency involved. However, among the different possible approaches a manager might decide to use in his daily interactions with his team members, coaching should be the approach of choice when the manager's goal is to further develop his people.

Through coaching in fact, the manager steps out of his proposing role and starts soliciting the team member's input and ideas on how to tackle the issue at hand. On the part of the manager, this implies the ability to ask the right questions, to listen attentively to the answers being given and challenge any assumptions. By doing this, the manager encourages the team member to use his knowledge, experience, skills, and intuition to come up with the answers. The whole process implies a certain degree of courage from the manager in evaluating and accepting the possible consequences of letting the team member make his own mistakes whenever possible.



This ability to step back and to resist the temptation to provide solutions may be difficult for a manager to develop (whereas an external coach would do this more naturally). However, the pay-off is huge. Through such a process in fact, the team member becomes more self-reliant, autonomous, and self-confident. Moreover, the manager can ensure that the desired results are delivered, by incorporating into the coaching process a mutually agreed 'checking system' whereby the team member is given the feedback and support he needs from the manager in order to tackle the issue, and the manager receives regular progress updates from the team member.

Coaching as a management style is a powerful tool to develop people in the workplace. Once you become familiar with the principles behind it and acquire the related competences, you can use this approach in almost every conversation you carry out with your team members, both during a formal session and in a ten minute conversation outside your office.

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<sup>i</sup> For more information on this, please refer to the Situational Leadership model by Center for Leadership Studies, Inc.

