

Coaching for Behavioral Change

Process and document adapted from The Art and Practice of Leadership Coaching, edited by: H. Morgan, P. Harkins and M. Goldsmith, Wiley, 2005

Behavioral Coaching Approach

I first get an agreement with my coaching client and their managers on two key variables: 1) what are the key behaviors that will make the biggest positive change in increased leadership effectiveness and 2) who are the key stakeholders that can determine (six to eighteen months later) if this change has occurred.

Qualifying the Coaching Client

There are several different types of coaching. The coaching process described here is behavioral coaching for successful leaders – focusing on changing leadership behavior.

This particular kind of coaching works well when, (1) the issue is behavioral, (2) the coaching client is given a fair chance and (3) the coaching client is motivated to improve.

Involving Key Stakeholders

Most of the coach's time is spent with the key stakeholders around the client. Research suggests that doing so dramatically improves coaching results (See "Recruiting Supportive Coaches: A Key to Achieving Positive Behavioral Change" in *The Many Facets of Leadership*, M. Goldsmith, V. Govindarajan, B. Kaye and A. Vicere, eds., FT Prentice Hall, 2003).

How do I involve key stakeholders? I ask *them* to help the person that I am coaching in four critically important ways:

- 1) ***Let go of the past.*** When we continually bring up the past, we demoralize people who are trying to change. Whatever happened in the past happened. It cannot be changed. By focusing on a future that can get better (as opposed to a past that cannot), the key stakeholders can help my clients improve.
- 2) ***Be helpful and supportive, not cynical, sarcastic or judgmental.*** As part of our coaching process, my clients involve key co-workers and ask them for help. If my clients reach out to key stakeholders and feel punished for trying to improve, they will generally quit trying. I don't blame them! Why should any of us work hard to build relationships with people who won't give us a chance? If my clients' co-workers are helpful and supportive, my clients experience increased motivation and are much more likely to improve.
- 3) ***Tell the truth.*** I do not want to work with a client, have them get a glowing report from key stakeholders and later hear that one of the stakeholders said, "He didn't *really* get better, we just said that". This is not fair to my client, to the company or to me.
- 4) ***Pick something to improve yourself.*** My clients are very open with key stakeholders about what they are going to change. As part of our process, our clients ask for ongoing

suggestions. I also ask the stakeholders to pick something to improve and to ask my client for suggestions. This makes the entire process “two-way” instead of “one way”. It helps the stakeholders act as “fellow travelers” who are trying to improve, not “judges” who are pointing their fingers at my client. It also greatly expands the value gained by the organization in the entire process (For more information, please see “Expanding the Value of Coaching: from the Leader to the Team to the Organization” in *The Art and Practice of Leadership Coaching*, H. Morgan, P. Harkins and M. Goldsmith, eds., Wiley, 2004).

Steps in the Behavioral Coaching Process

The following steps outline the behavioral coaching process.

- 1) ***Involve the individual being coached in determining the desired behavior in their roles.*** Individuals cannot be expected to change behavior if they don’t have a clear understanding of what desired behavior looks like. The people that I coach (in agreement with their managers) work with us to determine desired behavior.
- 2) ***Involve the individuals being coached in determining key stakeholders.*** Not only do clients need to be clear on desired behaviors, they need to be clear (again in agreement with their managers) on key stakeholders. There are two major reasons why people deny the validity of feedback, wrong items or wrong raters. By having our clients and their managers agree on the desired behaviors and key stakeholders in advance, we help ensure their “buy in” to the process.
- 3) ***Collect feedback.*** Depending on the situation, I may chose to personally interview all key stakeholders or provide a traditional 360° feedback instrument. In either case, feedback is critical. It is impossible to get evaluated on changed behavior if there is not agreement on what behavior to change!
- 4) ***Reach agreement on key behaviors for change.*** I generally recommend picking only 1-2 key areas for behavioral change with each client. This helps ensure maximum attention to the most important behavior. My clients and their managers agree upon the desired behavior for change. This ensures that I won’t spend a year working with my clients and have their managers determine that we have worked on the wrong thing!
- 5) ***Have the coaching clients respond to key stakeholders.*** The person being reviewed should talk with each key stakeholder and collect additional suggestions on how to improve on the key areas targeted for improvement. In responding, the person being coached should keep the conversation positive, simple and focused. When mistakes have been made in the past, it is generally a good idea to apologize and ask for help in changing the future. I suggest that my clients *listen* to stakeholder suggestions and not *judge* the suggestions.
- 6) ***Review what has been learned with clients and help them develop an action plan.*** As was stated earlier, my clients have to agree to the basic steps in our process. On the other hand, outside of the basic steps, all of the other ideas that I share with my clients are *suggestions*. I just ask them to listen to my ideas in the same way they are listening to the ideas from their key stakeholders. I then ask them to come back with a plan of what *they* want to do. These plans need to come from them, not me. After reviewing their plans, I almost always

encourage them to live up to their own commitments. I am much more of a facilitator than a judge. I usually just help my clients do what they know is the right thing to do.

- 7) ***Develop an ongoing follow-up process.*** Ongoing follow-up should be very efficient and focused. Questions like, “Based upon my behavior last month, what ideas do you have for me next month?” can keep a focus on the future. Within three months conduct a two-to-six item mini-survey with key stakeholders. They should be asked whether the person has become more or less effective in the areas targeted for improvement.
- 8) ***Review results and start again.*** If the person being coached has taken the process seriously, stakeholders almost invariably report improvement. Build on that success by repeating the process at month 6, 12 and 18. This type of follow-up will assure continued progress on initial goals and uncover additional areas for improvement. Stakeholders will appreciate the follow-up. No one minds filling out a focused, two-to-six-item questionnaire if they see positive results. The person being coached will benefit from ongoing, targeted steps to improve performance.

References of Interest

¹ For a study on the effectiveness of this process with internal coaches in GE Financial Services, see “Leveraging HR: How to Develop Leaders in ‘Real Time’”, in *Human Resources in the 21st Century*, M. Effron, R. Gandossy and M. Goldsmith, eds., Wiley, 2003.

² “Leadership is a Contact Sport”, H. Morgan and M. Goldsmith in *strategy+business*, Fall 2004.

³ “Recruiting Supportive Coaches: A Key to Achieving Positive Behavioral Change” in *The Many Facets of Leadership*, M. Goldsmith, V. Govindarajan, B. Kaye and A. Vicere, eds., FT Prentice Hall, 2003.

⁴ “Try Feedforward, instead of Feedback” originally published in *Leader to Leader*, Summer 2002.

⁵ For a great description of the impact of co-workers’ focusing on their own improvement, read “Expanding the Value of Coaching: from the Leader to the Team to the Organization” in *The Art and Practice of Leadership Coaching*, H. Morgan, P. Harkins and M. Goldsmith, eds., Wiley, 2005.