

Leaders Serving as Coaches

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Individuals who desire to grow as leaders work on building both competency and awareness. We usually think of “training” as the primary method for building competency. In my column “Building Awareness in Future Leaders,” I suggested that a method for building awareness is “coaching.”

We humans are limited in our awareness not because we don’t care or are mentally deficient, but because we are constrained to one set of life experiences. We each see the world from our extremely limited perspective. We are just not conscious of the many other points of view and potential insights that exist.

As a leader, you deal with all kinds of people, each having his or her unique set of life experiences. Your colleagues and team members work hard, but sometimes they (or you) feel that they could perform better. You sense that they know what they are supposed to do and generally how to do it. But each situation they face is unique or requires judgment or finesse, and sometimes they (or you) would like to improve their methods and/or results.

Good leaders encourage collaboration, and that includes seeking coaching from any beneficial source. When an individual comes to you for coaching, you have a special opportunity to strengthen that individual, enhance your organization, and improve your reputation as a trusted resource. Your compassionate support can result in both improved performance and an enhanced relationship between you and the individual you are coaching.

Three distinct steps help the individual become aware that there are many ways to achieve the desired outcome.

REFLECTING TOGETHER. Consider a specific situation where the individual recently took action. Listen closely as the individual describes the situation, recalling his or her thoughts and feelings in analyzing the situation, considering options for response, choosing a particular action to take, executing the action, and dealing with the outcome. There should be little flavor of criticism from you here. Rather, you provide the space and safety for the individual to reflect and explore, something we humans do far better with a trusted ally than by ourselves.

OPTION GENERATING. When the individual feels that you deeply understand what happened, the coaching shifts to considering options for the next time a similar incident arises. At this point, the objective is to generate a wide variety of options. Engage your experiences and imagination. Your creativity will stimulate new thinking and break limiting barriers for the individual you are coaching. You will observe the “aha” of new awareness in the person’s facial expression, body language, and tone of voice. As your creative energies wane, help the individual use desired outcomes and personal values as guides in selecting a preferred option to pursue the next time a similar situation presents itself.

MENTAL REHEARSAL. As the coach, you of course won’t be the one performing the behavior the next time. However, you can help the individual you are coaching imagine the situation and mentally rehearse the actions to take. Deep visualization (and perhaps literal practice) of the selected response will anchor the action so that when it is indeed performed, it is executed just as it has been imagined and expressed in the safety of the coach’s support.

You contribute to growing leaders when you provide a safe place to reflect on past performance and look collaboratively with them at what “could be”. Providing your colleagues and team members with a new awareness of what’s possible, along with inspiration to try new approaches, is a genuine gift to both their future and that of your organization.