

You, Too, Can Provide “Safe Harbor” Coaching

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It's not unusual for me to refer to a book that contains insightful information. However, it's not every day that just the title of a book catches my attention and generates a powerful paradigm shift.

Ken Blanchard's latest book, coauthored with Garry Ridge, is entitled *Helping People Win at Work: A Business Philosophy Called “Don't Mark My Paper, Help Me Get an A.”*

Just think about that title in terms of your responsibilities. If you have any kind of performance review system, and if you happen to be my boss, you know what it means to “mark my paper.” It's tough evaluating a year's worth of work against a standard that supposedly applies to everybody.

Sure, you probably have a few superstars. They're easy to evaluate. But doing so feels inadequate, doesn't it? You know they do a great job. They know it, too. Your compliments won't motivate them. They do good work because of something inside them, not because of the evaluation system.

And you probably have a few slackers. You'd really rather not deal with them. They do barely enough to get by, but the annual review forces you to confront the fact that you don't do what you should do the rest of the year. Your good folks don't appreciate that you tolerate the inadequate performance of these few laggards. But you wonder what you can do. You can't fire them, can you?

Maybe if you could put enough pressure on them, they'd quit. Or if you tightened up on the standards consistently, maybe you could convince somebody in authority that they need to go. Either way, the work required to get to that point seems insurmountable. It's easier just to let them get by.

Then there's everybody in between the superstars and slackers. Who do you think hates performance reviews more, you or them? If they did anything worthy of mention during the year, somebody (likely you) will exhort them to contribute the same quality or quantity of work all the time. They probably figure it's easier to just put in the hours and do what's needed to keep their jobs.

So along comes Ken Blanchard (author of dozens of “how to” management books) and Garry Ridge (President of the WD-40 Company) telling you that you should help every team member “get an A.”

And what would “get an A” mean to members of your team? If possible, set aside for a moment any thought of your performance review system. Think about each person on your team. What would “get an A” mean for Joe, for Jean, for Bill, for Riley?

Maybe one would like to be respected as an extremely qualified craftsman. Maybe another wants to get promoted. Perhaps one wants to get as much overtime as possible. It's unlikely that any two individuals would have exactly the same ambition.

Imagine creating an environment where each person lets you know exactly what he or she would like to accomplish through work. Could you let folks be motivated by whatever motivates them rather than having to meet some arbitrary expectation? Do their personal visions have to be acceptable to you?

In last week's article, I talked about “safe harbor” coaching for business owners and key executives. (See my website, either the Blog or the Article Archives.) By “safe harbor,” I mean that any topic is fair game--no repercussions. Specifically, I mentioned blowing off steam about some work-related situation or sharing some really creative ideas about what might be possible for future initiatives.

“Safe harbor” coaching is one of the main reasons for the rapid growth in executive coaching in recent years. You could provide that same kind of “safe harbor” listening ear for individuals you influence.

You'd have to maintain strict confidentiality, of course. If people knew that you were sharing what they had offered to you privately, folks would no longer open themselves to you.

And you'd have to suspend judgment. No one would share their hopes and dreams if word got out that you criticized someone's aspirations.

If you decide to do this, you'll have to work harder to remember the specific interests of each person. You'll not be able to live with the convenient presumption that everybody wants the same things.

Further, you'll have to live with allegations of unfairness, because you'll be providing different opportunities to different individuals. You'll have to prepare yourself to repeat many times, “I'm just helping him achieve what he desires. What is it that you desire?”

That question, of course, will be hard for many people to answer. The convenient, easy answer will be “more money.” You'll have to become very familiar with your company's progression system, identifying for those who want more money what they'll have to do to obtain a higher rate of pay.

Is it wrong to give members of your team what they want? Maybe your teachers in school didn't do what would help you get an A. Why do what they did? Find out what each team member wants and work for a year to help each one achieve it--and see how hard they work for you and for the company!