

# Chief Learning Officer Magazine

## Coaching and Mentoring: Enhancing Education

November 2005 - Mario Berard

Chief learning officers at top-performing organizations know that it is not enough to merely hire the best people, set goals and watch the cream rise to the top. They also know that education and training, on their own, are not likely to produce the business results their companies want and need to remain competitive. For the skills and knowledge gained in training to take hold, grow and positively impact the bottom line, these chief learning officers build a powerful coaching and mentoring process and ensure its consistent execution throughout the organization.

In today's increasingly complex and competitive business environment, coaching is becoming one of the most powerful tools to drive and sustain employee performance. A well-developed coaching and mentoring process builds individual employee strength, develops personal leadership and responsibility, and delivers desired business results to the organization—simultaneously.

Research indicates the use of coaching across industries is on the rise, but so too is the confusion over what effective coaching is, how to build a coaching process that links to the organization's business model and overall learning strategy, and successful implementation of the process enterprise-wide to attain peak performance levels.

### **What Coaching Is—And Isn't**

The practice of coaching often is confused with performance counseling. In reality, the two are vastly different. Fundamentally, performance counseling addresses unsatisfactory performance, while coaching builds on elements of satisfactory performance and sustains them for the long term.

Good coaching is about directing an individual employee's performance toward the business results that need to be achieved by the department, business unit or company as a whole. Rather than focusing on what might have gone wrong between sessions, effective coaching emphasizes what the employee has done well and how those behaviors can be continued into the future.

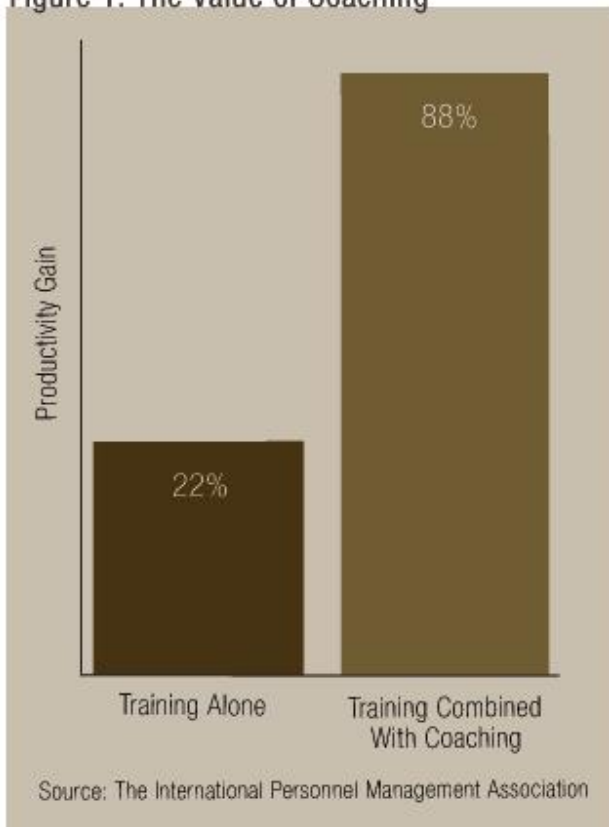
Coaching involves a collaborative relationship between employee and manager that is rooted in mutual respect and rapport. Conversation is anchored in constructive, respectful language that endorses rather than diminishes people's skills and abilities. Coaching fosters entrepreneurial thinking, raises self-awareness, promotes self-development and self-confidence and increases motivation—all aimed at increasing business success.

A study conducted by the Gallup organization indicates that those companies that have implemented coaching programs are 50 percent more likely to have low turnover, have 56 percent higher customer loyalty and achieve 27 percent greater profitability.

### **A Results-Oriented Coaching Environment**

Great coaches are at the heart of great learning organizations. Without them, much of what is gained in training is lost or forgotten by the time employees are back on the job. A study published by the International Personnel Management Association reveals that workforce training increases productivity by 22.4 percent, while training combined with coaching results in an overall productivity gain of 88 percent. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1: The Value of Coaching



A great coach sees to it that what employees learn in training is transferred from the classroom to their jobs, that they are working toward achieving specific outcomes and that they continue to build competency. The key is for coaches to integrate skill reinforcement as they go about everyday, normal business processes.

In order to build a true learning organization that generates measurable results, chief learning officers must ensure that coaching becomes the way the organization does business going forward. The process for creating a coaching environment that is self-sustaining includes six key steps:

- Gain executive and upper management commitment: As with any other corporate educational initiative, building and implementing a results-driven, enterprise-wide coaching process requires firm commitment from the leadership of the organization. Without executive-level buy-in to the coaching process and the significant benefits it offers, a CLO cannot expect adoption of the process (or its execution) by the company's workforce.

- Establish training in effective coaching techniques for managers: Good managers are not necessarily good coaches. Effective coaching requires that managers are expert at creating dialogue with employees, problem-solving, providing balanced feedback and creating viable action plans. Training managers across the organization in these techniques and refining their skills on an ongoing basis is crucial to ensure that the coaching process works to its fullest advantage.
- Incorporate a recognition and reward system: Recognition and reward programs should support an organization's business strategy to keep people motivated, focused and moving in the right direction. Effective coaching can uncover achievements that might otherwise go unrecognized. The coaching process should include recognition and rewards as a way to call attention to and celebrate memorable employee achievement.
- Create a system for tracking and measuring results: In order to know if the coaching process is contributing to achieving the organization's goals, a system for tracking and measuring results needs to be instituted. What is tracked and measured during coaching sessions must link to the business strategy and indicate the skills, behaviors and performance levels that employees are expected to exhibit.
- Make people responsible and hold them accountable: It is in accountability that people often feel their own success. An effective coaching environment places responsibility for performance and accountability for achievement or lack thereof on the individual employee.
- Communicate details of the initiative: All of the particulars associated with the coaching process must be communicated throughout the organization so that roles, responsibilities and expectations are understood by managers and their employees. Getting upper management to participate in this communication process is a powerful reinforcement of the organization's overall commitment to the success of the coaching initiative.

### **Building the Coaching Model**

There are two types of coaching that chief learning officers should consider for their organizations: results coaching and observational coaching. In a results coaching session, a manager compares the goals that were set for the individual to the actual performance. The coach explores the individual's results, looking for the skills and knowledge that are serving the employee well and that can be leveraged in additional ways to achieve established goals.

Observational coaching enables the manager to observe the employee doing the job and learn the activities and behaviors that are being performed firsthand. Sales- and service-oriented jobs lend themselves well to observational coaching. Regardless of the type of coaching employed, organizations that meet the greatest success subscribe to a systematic coaching model:

- Be clear on the business results and the plan to achieve them: Before any coaching sessions occur, the coach lets each employee know what results the department or unit is trying to achieve, what the employee is expected to do to reach those results and how he or she is expected to do it. The desired performance is defined in observable or measurable terms. For example, a manager in a financial services company may define desired performance as growing deposit accounts, increasing customer satisfaction or improving loan quality.

- Set a coaching agenda: Agenda-setting is an important component of coaching, as it sets the tone for the one-on-one session to come. The coach identifies key issues that need to have the department's or unit's attention and communicates them to each employee. Employees are asked to come to their individual session prepared to discuss their performance in light of those issues.
- Guide the coaching session in a controlled, disciplined manner: The coach breaks each coaching session down into three components: examine what the employee is doing well and how to continue doing it, look at performance gaps or opportunities and ways to address them, and develop a realistic action plan for the employee to execute. All of this can take place in a concise period of time if the manager is prepared and communicates in an objective, purposeful way that directs the employee to achieve desired business results.
- Encourage self-discovery: Rather than telling the employee how to be successful, the coach helps the employee discover how to be successful. This is the key to a productive coaching session. Through a series of questions that drill down into the activities performed by the employee, the coach helps each employee assess their skill and whether it is at an appropriate level or needs some attention. For example, in a financial services organization, a coach might say, "I see you opened one new deposit account. I know your goal was 10, but let's focus on how that one was accomplished. Can you tell me about that situation? How did it come about? How did you get that person interested? What can you do to make that happen again?" The coach focuses on the employee's positive behavior and how to make it happen again—not on the fact that the established goal was not achieved. An employee who digs deep to discover what went well leaves feeling more capable and confident, which will more quickly lead that employee to close any performance gaps identified.
- Develop realistic action plans: Through this prescribed line of questioning, the coach works at getting the employee to pull something out of the experience that is going to help him repeat the process and achieve a greater outcome in the period prior to the next coaching session. This becomes the action plan that links activities the employee can perform to the business results the coach wants to achieve. The plan lists the specific behaviors the employee is going to continue and the new activity or behavior to be implemented. The employee leaves the coaching session knowing exactly what activities are important and how to proceed.
- Continue coaching on a regular schedule: Results coaching sessions should occur on a monthly basis. Observational coaching can occur as the need demands, but frequently enough for the manager to see how the employee performs and form a realistic assessment. Each session should build on what was accomplished in the previous session to help the employee move step-by-step to achieve a goal.
- Act as a mentor and role model: The most effective coaches are also active role models and mentors who lead by example. Coaches should demonstrate the performance standards they expect their employees to uphold.

The coaching model is deeply entrenched in process, and is designed to bring about change, direction and discipline from within the employee. A manager who tells an employee what to do and how to do it is not coaching. A true coach asks questions, listens to the answers, guides the employee in pinpointing the skills and behaviors that are on target for reaching goal and supports the continuation of those behaviors. The result is a strong, independent-thinking employee who works toward achieving the goal in ways that are true to her own talents.

## **Impacting the Bottom Line**

Coaching is the most critical leadership activity a manager can engage in because of its powerful influence on individual employee performance. Leadership activities in general are designed to keep a department, unit or workgroup focused in a disciplined way on their goal. Coaching is the activity that gets each individual in the group aligned so that the team becomes stronger and reaches the intended business results. When managers coach consistently and effectively, they draw out the best in people, help them close performance gaps and empower them to lead themselves. The result is a stronger bottom line for the organization.

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