

Coaching Students to Coach

Abstract: This activity is a hands-on method of helping students to develop the skills of coaching employees to better performance. This is accomplished through role plays in a classroom environment that encourage discussion and real-time feedback. What makes this activity unique are two twists to the traditional role play format. First, the instructor often interrupts the role play with a “timeout” to analyze and discuss what has just occurred. Second, students playing the role of the manager in the role play change out frequently, allowing others to participate and encouraging active engagement.

Keywords: coaching, role play, performance management

Introduction

Coaching an employee to overcome a significant performance issue—often called management coaching or executive coaching—is becoming an increasingly popular means of developing leadership (Kenworthy, Passarelli, & Van Oosten, 2014). Coaching’s definition varies in the literature, but it is generally considered a “helping relationship” in which a manager assists an employee “to achieve a mutually identified set of goals to improve his or her professional performance” (Kilburg, 1996, p. 142).

As management educators, our quest is to help students to develop this skill set in a classroom or online environment. This in-classroom activity provides students a simulated opportunity to practice coaching and to receive real-time feedback. It might suitably be used in a variety of management, human resources, and leadership courses. This exercise can be adapted successfully with undergraduate and graduate students as well as students with various levels of professional experience.

Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications

This activity is based on the simple four-step model of coaching employees to better performance proposed by De Haan, Bertie, Day, and Sills (2010). We have found this model is easy for students to comprehend and apply; however, another model of coaching may work equally well for this activity.

The steps in the De Haan, Bertie, Day, and Sills (2010) model are as follows: 1) describe the current performance, 2) describe the desired performance, 3) get a commitment to change, and 4) follow up. (See Appendix A for a visual representation of this model.)

Learning Objectives

We see two learning objectives to this exercise. The first objective is to help students plan and structure the initial coaching conversation between a manager and an employee. The second objective is to allow students to implement this plan in a facilitated role play and to receive immediate feedback on from peers and from their instructor.

We have found this activity sharpens students' collaboration, problem-solving, and feedback-delivery skills. Instructors can expect their students' understanding to increase in the importance of planning the structure of a coaching conversation and anticipating the possible reactions of the employee being coached.

Exercise Overview

Prior to the class session about coaching, we provide the students with the descriptions of the 4 fictitious individuals who work in the Production Department of a fictitious company. These descriptions are found in Appendix A. One of the individuals is an unnamed Production Supervisor; the other 3 are employees named Allison, Levi, and Chloe who report to the Production Supervisor. Despite their strong performance in some areas, Allison, Levi, and Chloe each have one key performance issue (resistance to change, slipping productivity, abrasive communication style, respectively) that holds them back from succeeding and must be addressed by their manager. Class members are asked to come to class prepared to discuss possible approaches to coach each of these employees to better performance using the De Haan, Bertie, Day, and Sills (2010) model of coaching.

Also before class, we select 3 students to play the roles of Allison, Levi, and Chloe. We ask these students to come to class prepared to respond as their characters might actually respond if their manager attempted to coach them to better performance in their stated performance issue.

In class, we separate the entire class into 3 groups: Group Allison, Group Levi, or Group Chloe. We inform each group that we will soon hold a role play in front of the class in which the Production Supervisor will attempt to coach their assigned employee to better performance. This role play will simulate the first formal discussion between the Production Supervisor and the employee to begin the coaching process.

Each group is asked to complete the following:

1. Choose someone in the group to play the role of the Production Supervisor in the role play first. (As mentioned below, the student playing this role often changes throughout the role play.)
2. Determine how the first coaching session with their assigned employee should be structured. Specific questions to address include: What is the main objective in the coaching session? Where should the meeting take place? How should the Production Supervisor open the meeting? What should be said? What problems do you anticipate facing? How do you expect the employee to react? How will you respond to these reactions?
3. Prepare to carry out the planned coaching session in the role play using the De Haan, Bertie, Day, and Sills (2010) model.

About 30-40 minutes is allotted for this portion of the activity. During this time, we move from group to group answering questions, giving direction, and encouraging group members to

practice the role play within their small group before doing so in front of the class. The 3 students assigned to play the roles of Allison, Levi, and Chloe also participate in small-group discussions, although they are assigned to groups other than the characters they will represent in the role play.

Following the small-group discussions, we bring the class back together. All class members seat themselves in a semi-circle to encourage participation and dialogue. We then proceed with the role plays for each employee. We allow each group to position the chairs and/or table as they desire for the coaching session with their assigned employee.

The role play ventures from a traditional role play format in two ways:

1. Throughout the role play, we as instructors often call a “timeout” to ask the class for feedback on what has just occurred. For example, we might ask, “What is working well so far? What is not working well?” or “What would be a more effective way of saying that?” This keeps all students engaged, especially when their own role plays are not occurring.
2. The students playing the role of Production Supervisor frequently swap out in the middle of the role play. This change occurs either because the student currently in the role play requests the change or else another member of the group asks to “tag in” into the role play to assume the role of Production Supervisor. This frequent change of students playing this role encourages participation from all group members and creates a lively exercise. For continuity, we do not rotate out the students playing the roles of Allison, Levi, and Chloe.

Class discussion follows each role play as time allows. It is especially helpful to have each group reveal how and why they structured the coaching session as they did. We also ask the students playing the roles of Allison, Levi, and Chloe to share their perspectives on how successfully the role plays went. Overall, we find this activity encourages broad participation through the small-group discussions, the real-time feedback throughout the role plays, the swapping of roles throughout the role plays, and the large-group discussion afterward.

Session Description

The activity would run in a similar manner at the MOBTS conference. The only materials needed for the session would be printed copies of the two appendices (below) for each participant. Just before the session begins, we would select 3 participants to play the roles of Allison, Levi, and Chloe and would verbally provide instructions for the role play as we do for our students before class. In the session, we would divide the participants into 3 groups and would follow the activity as described earlier.

This session would best be accomplished in a 90-minute time window at MOBTS. Introduction and instructions would require about 10 minutes, followed by 30-40 minutes for small-group preparation. The remaining time would be devoted to the role plays. For adequate discussion during and after each role play, 15-20 minutes should be allocated for each role play.

References

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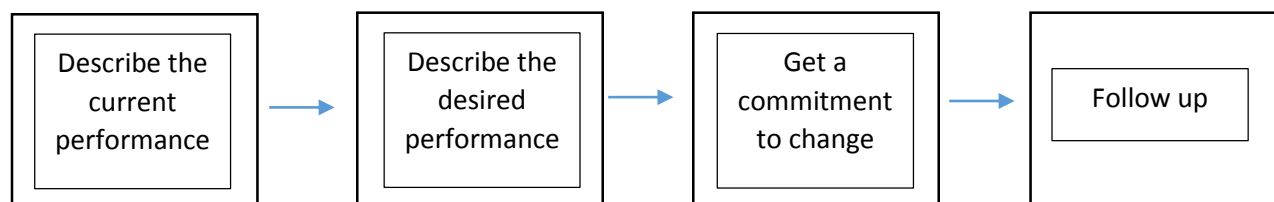
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Appendix A

Four-Step Model of Coaching Employees



Adapted from De Haan, Bertie, Day, and Sills (2010).

Appendix B

Your Role: Production Supervisor

You directly supervise 12 Project Managers in the Production Department at a textbook publisher. Your role is to ensure the company's textbooks are edited, designed, and published on a tight schedule. You have worked in the publishing industry for 15 years, starting with a competitor before moving to your current company. You worked 8 years a Project Manager in

the team you now supervise before accepting a promotion to Production Supervisor 3 years ago. Many of the employees on your team were once your peers and coworkers.

Employee 1: Allison

Allison jokingly calls herself Queen of Production. Her tenure in the company—24 years—ranks her first in seniority in your department, and near the top of all employees across the company. It's not uncommon to hear Allison tell stories of how production operated “way back when,” long before digital publishing. She has many close friends in the company, including the company's current president and CEO. Allison generally has an agreeable personality within your team—until a new policy or process is introduced. When this occurs, she typically becomes one of the loudest opponents to change in the department. Almost without fail, she is among the first to object to a proposed change. You saw her resistance to change as her peer when a new electronic production tracking system was introduced a decade ago. Now she routinely criticizes the online publishing tool your team implemented 6 months ago. You worry that Allison's opposition to the online tool will affect the attitude of the newer members of your team.

Employee 2: Levi

Levi was your first hire after being promoted to Production Supervisor 3 years ago. He came from one of your company's top competitors and brought extensive publishing and production experience with him. Over the past 3 years he has consistently carried one of the heaviest workloads of any Project Manager on your team. He has accepted additional assignments, and has willingly worked extra hours to complete them. Lately, however, his productivity has

slipped. Last month he was late publishing one of his textbooks for the first time that you can remember, and he has missed several smaller deadlines on other projects over the past 4 months. Rumors are circulating on your team that Levi is burning out on the job. When you have asked him for explanations for the missed deadlines, he has not provided specific answers. You worry that his productivity will continue to slip, affecting the publication dates of some important textbooks he manages.

Employee 3: Chloe

Chloe has the strongest command of grammar and editing of anyone on your team. The authors of the textbooks who publish with your company love her editorial knowledge—she is meticulous and exacting in her production work, and she prides herself on publishing error-free books. She also publishes her assigned books on time without fail. Unfortunately, sometimes she accomplishes this perfect track record at the expense of her interpersonal relationships. She can be combative in meetings and is perceived by many coworkers as pushy and moody. Frequently she expects other departments to prioritize her projects above their own, and she is not afraid to raise her voice and boss others into following her demands. Chloe has been with the company for 5 years but transferred to the Production team 4 years ago from a different department. You worry that Chloe's communication style will deteriorate the strong relationships you have established with your counterparts in other departments.