

WEBINARS

KEY LEARNING SUMMARY

Keys to Coaching Your Employees

featuring **Ed Batista**

MARCH 20, 2014

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Keys to Coaching Your Employees

OVERVIEW

Executive coaching is an essential leadership role. A leader who doesn't coach may waste excessive time hand-holding and may never see fully what teammates are capable of producing. But it is not a solution in every instance. And coaching requires special skills, even specialized training, for most effective results.

CONTEXT

Ed Batista shared his extensive knowledge about the potential and limitations of executive coaching, and the skills leaders need for coaching to be most effective.

KEY LEARNINGS

Coaching is an essential leadership role.

What is executive coaching? Ed Batista's four-part definition:

- **“Coaching is an essential leadership role...”** It's not possible to be an effective leader without coaching tools in one's toolkit.
- **“...that can result in huge benefits...”** Being on the receiving end of coaching can improve one's abilities to handle stress comfortably and find solutions independently.
- **“...But it's not an all-purpose tool...”** Coaching isn't right for every situation.
- **“...and it requires specific skills,”** even special training. Coaching uses inquiry and other tools to develop people's capabilities. Training is helpful to learn how to employ these tools most effectively.

A helpful construct for understanding how coaching relates to leadership comes from *Power Up* by David Bradford and Allan Cohen. Coaching is a “post-heroic” leadership trait (Figure 1). “Coach” is at the opposite end of the spectrum from “expert,” a leader whose authority comes from holding all of the answers. Instead of supplying answers, the coach asks questions in ways that help others discover solutions for themselves.



Figure 1
A helpful framework for understanding where coaching fits into leadership.

CONTRIBUTORS

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“Coaching has turned
careers around.”

—ED BATISTA

Coaching is not an all-purpose solution, however.

Coaching is not appropriate for all situations when improved performance is the goal. Its usefulness is contextual; the particular benefits that coaching offers must suit the leader's needs. Sometimes, it is heroic leader qualities that would better elicit the needed performance. That is the case when leaders must give exacting instructions to get a job done right (playing the "expert" role) rather than develop people's capacity for finding their own solutions (the "coach" role). Situations in which coaching works best include:

- **When working with high-potentials.** Coaching fosters their long-term development.
- **When working with knowledge workers.** The "expert" leadership role has limitations when workers may be more knowledgeable than the boss.
- **When commitment trumps control.** When securing employees' commitment and intrinsic motivation is more important than controlling them, coaching is the best approach.

Instances in which coaching won't work:

- **When dealing with serious underperformers.** Coaching is not a performance plan.
- **When you, the leader, do have the answers.** If you know exactly how work must be done, direct instruction is better than inquiry; if a question has just one answer, people feel quizzed.
- **When control is more important than commitment.** In doing routine tasks for example, this may be the case.

Before dismissing coaching in these instances, make sure you understand the situation accurately. Is an apparent underperformer really an underperformer or victim of an attribution error? Do you as leader really have the answers or just want to believe so? Is control really what is most important for the work, or might you need to learn to let go? If the answers are "no," coaching may work.

Among the skills for leaders to have in their coaching toolkit, the right mindset is critical.

Effective coaching most requires six skills. They are easy to understand but difficult to master. This webinar was not intended to equip people to coach but merely to point them in the right direction, with further reading recommended (see Reading List).

1. **Coaching mindset.** A helpful construct for understanding the right mindset comes from Carol Dweck's work on how perceptions shape reality. If we perceive our mistakes and abilities through the prism of a "fixed mindset," we react emotionally to evidence of failures or flaws. Over time, we become inured to the pain, but don't learn from mistakes. A "growth mindset," conversely, allows us to experience failure less emotionally and learn from it.

Coaching helps the coached person adopt a productive growth mindset. There is an emphasis on learning from mistakes versus letting them fuel negative narratives about oneself. The effort is less directed toward “fixing” than understanding. Support is offered hand in hand with challenge; empathy goes with accountability.

2. **Listening skills.** Focused attention on coaching is more important than the time spent. What matters most is listening so the other person feels heard. Eliminate distractions and cultivate a sense of presence in the moment.
3. **Powerful questions.** Ask questions that probe deeper than “yes or no” answers. “What” and “How” questions help draw out relevant facts; they are better than “Why” questions that require interpretation of facts. Avoid rewording a question if you think of a better way to express it; just ask once and stop. Cultivate an atmosphere of safety that maximizes openness and reflection, and minimizes defensiveness.
4. **Modes of inquiry.** Much of coaching is inquiry. Inquiry is used to discover the employee’s viewpoints and introduce new interpretations to be considered. The types of inquiry are:
 - *Pure inquiry.* This starts with receptivity (even silence). Ask what the person wants to discuss; having a set agenda is counterproductive. Avoiding presumptive questions is key in this phase. Don’t cut this important information-gathering phase short.
 - *Diagnostic inquiry.* In the second phase, you redirect the conversation to focus on the feelings, motives, and actions surrounding a problematic incident or situation so both parties can better understand it.
 - *Confrontational inquiry.* This doesn’t mean “confrontation” in the belligerent sense; it simply means introducing new ideas and hypotheses that call the person’s narrative into question. Then the coach’s narrative is substituted.
 - *Process inquiry.* This infrequent but essential step turns the focus to the coaching relationship itself, to provide the coach with feedback on how helpful the experience was.

While coaching is much about inquiry, it also requires advocacy of the leader’s viewpoint. Finding the right balance is key to effective coaching.

5. **Emotion management.** Managing emotions doesn’t mean suppressing them. Most thought is emotionally based; reasoning is a small part of brain activity. Ideally, reasoning and emotions work in concert. Cultivating emotional awareness is key. This involves sensing and understanding our emotions, then regulating their verbalization and expression. Effective coaches are emotionally invested in the results of coaching and have strong feelings during the process. Their emotions shouldn’t be hidden, as the coached person needs to feel that the coach cares. However, coaches should not be attached to any particular outcome, or else the other person’s journey of discovery will be short-circuited. It is important to remember the distinction between emotional investment and attachment.

“When challenging someone, we offer support. When holding a person accountable, we offer empathy.”

—ED BATISTA

6. **Effective feedback.** Giving feedback is essential to managerial coaching; it is where “advocacy” enters into the picture. The coach is putting forth his or her own views versus listening to the other person’s narrative.

Feedback by its nature presents a “social threat,” which elicits the same biological stress responses as a threat to one’s safety. So it is important to minimize the threat response by cultivating a relationship where the other person feels known by you. The relationship should be characterized by “acknowledged bids” (invitations for your attention that you might have declined but have not ignored) and expressed appreciation.

A helpful construct for minimizing defensive triggers is keeping in mind “the net” (a concept of Stanford professor David Bradford). The area between the two nets in Figure 2 should be the focus of discussion, the behavior that both parties agree has occurred. Disclosing emotional responses is helpful as long as they are expressed dispassionately to discourage defensiveness (e.g., “When you do [x], I feel [y]”).

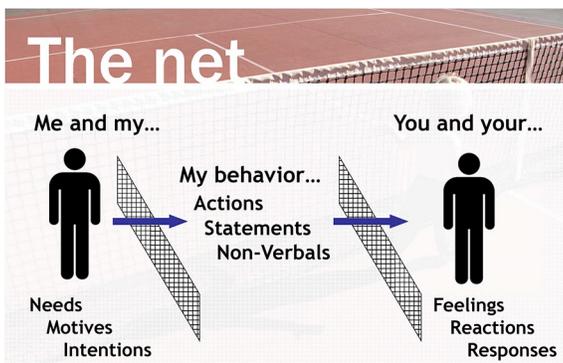


Figure 2

When giving feedback, stay on your side of the net, focusing on the observed behavior that is clearly true.

Coaching Tips and Traps.

Tips for putting these learnings into practice include:

- **Create coaching moments.** Don’t reserve coaching for special times. It should be informal, occurring as opportunities arise.
- **Gauge readiness of people for coaching.** If defensiveness is the response to attempted coaching, efforts won’t be effective.
- **Make coaching normal.** Don’t treat it as a performance review, with all of the attendant stress.
- **Celebrate small victories.** Often people aren’t praised enough, but the most trusted relationships are characterized by appreciation that is well expressed.

- **Use this experiential learning cycle** as a tool when helping people analyze the effects of their actions:
 - Act
 - Reflect: What resulted from my actions?
 - Conceptualize: What do these results imply?
 - Apply: What will I do differently next time?
 - Repeat

Be sure to avoid coaching traps like:

- **Giving advice prematurely.** It is tempting to weigh in with a new narrative too early, before getting all of the relevant information. If you might not have all relevant facts, repeat the initial “pure inquiry” phase.
- **Overpowering resistance.** A boss is able to overpower resistance but shouldn’t. Coaching won’t work with the resistant.
- **Creating dependence.** Sometimes, the recipient becomes dependent on the support offered by the coach; support should be balanced by not-so-comfortable challenges.
- **Providing excessive support or insufficient support.** The right mix of challenge and support is a delicate balance.

Reading List

To learn more, check out:

- **On post-heroic leadership:** *Power Up*, David Bradford and Allan Cohen
- **On leadership roles:** *Scrum Master as Team Coach*, Pierluigi Pugliese; *Leading in Four Dimensions*, Ed Batista
- **On mindset:** *Mindset*, Carol Dweck; *The Meaning of Mindset*, Ed Batista
- **On a coaching mindset:** *The Coaching Manager*, James Hunt and Joseph Weintraub
- **On inquiry and coaching traps:** *Helping*, Edgar Schein; *Humble Inquiry*, Edgar Schein
- **On emotion:** *Descartes’ Error*, Antonio Damasio
- **On emotion in organizations:** *Building the Emotional Intelligence of Groups*, Vanessa Druskat and Steven Wolff
- **On feedback and all of the above:** *HBR Guide to Coaching Your Employees*

BIOGRAPHIES

Ed Batista

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Ed Batista is an executive coach and an Instructor at the Stanford Graduate School of Business. He writes regularly on issues related to coaching and professional development at edbatista.com. Ed contributed to the *HBR Guide to Coaching Your Employees*, and is currently writing a book on self-coaching for HBR Press.

At the Stanford Graduate School of Business, Ed provides individual coaching and leads teams in the Arbuckle Leadership Fellows Program, which he helped to launch in 2007, and serves as an instructor in the Leadership Labs.

As an executive coach Ed works primarily with leaders who are experiencing or anticipating a transition, ranging from new demands on their talents to a new position or role to an entirely new career.

In addition to his MBA from Stanford, Ed received a BA in History, *magna cum laude*, from Brown University.

Angelia Herrin (Moderator)

Editor for Research and Special Projects, Harvard Business Review

Angelia Herrin is Editor for Research and Special Projects at *Harvard Business Review*. At *Harvard Business Review*, Herrin oversaw the re-launch of the management newsletter line and established the conference and virtual seminar division for *Harvard Business Review*. More recently, she created a new series to deliver customized programs and products to organizations and associations.

Prior to coming to *Harvard Business Review*, Herrin was the vice president for content at womenConnect.com, a website focused on women business owners and executives.

Herrin's journalism experience spans twenty years, primarily with Knight-Ridder newspapers and USA Today. At Knight-Ridder, she covered Congress, as well as the 1988 presidential elections. At USA Today, she worked as Washington editor, heading the 1996 election coverage. She won the John S. Knight Fellowship in Professional Journalism at Stanford University in 1989–90.

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