

Peer Coaching – One Man’s story

“There was a time, not so long ago, when being coached at work meant that there was a problem. If you were pulled aside for a “coaching moment”, then you (and everyone else) knew that you weren’t living up to expectations. Today, coaching is what happens when someone has recognized that you have potential that should be developed and the practice is widespread. Perhaps this change in perception is due to the realization by business leaders that coaching works.”

Does it? This was the question on my mind as I sat in a meeting led by our VP Operations, VP Human resources and an outside consultant, who eloquently delivered the soliloquy above. The meeting was about a peer-coaching pilot to be launched within our organization.

I have no time for bogus HR/culture projects. As a senior manager in the IT division at a growing consumer products company, I am already scrambling to find enough hours in the day to do what I need to do. Sitting in that first meeting, I couldn’t help but wonder if the whole thing wasn’t some kind of set-up. It was the perfect scheme to show some action toward our lack luster performance on employee metrics. Or perhaps to another behind the curtain succession exercise. I was suspicious. I also knew I had some gaps to develop on the interpersonal side. And, the fact that participation was voluntary, and the process already figured out was an encouraging aspect so, I decided to give it some thought. I went home that night and did a little research.

My web search turned up mixed reviews. While one research study found that only about one third of respondents considered peer coaching very (or extremely) effective, another article cited an 88% increase in productivity using coaching after a training session, versus a 22.4% increase in productivity due to training alone. Who was to be believed? In the end it was Marshall Goldsmith who tipped the scales for me. In an inspiring article entitled, “To Help Others Develop, Start with Yourself” Goldsmith wrote about some of the world’s most powerful corporate executives who are opening up to their colleagues, asking them for help with personal development. “Wow,” I thought, “if Michael Dell can do it, then so can I.”

As it turned out, the peer coaching process that was being used in our pilot was based on the work of Goldsmith and others. It went something like this:

Initial Assessment

First, in a kind of 360-degree feedback situation, my manager and I identified stakeholders who could be relied upon to provide accurate, honest and fair information about my behavior at work. These individuals were asked:

- What is the person to be coached doing well currently?
- How could the person improve?
- Do you have any other suggestions for this person’s future development?

Once all stakeholders were interviewed, the comments were organized by topic and the consultant and I sat down to review the results. Overall, the positive comments were encouraging and some patterns emerged. We identified three specific areas where I could improve. At that point, I was ready to dive in to all three, but according to the consultant (and Mr. Goldsmith) focus is important. I chose listening skills as the one area that I was most passionate about improving first and we moved into phase two, collecting input.

Collecting Input – FeedForward

Far from my imagined fight to the death, my relationship with my colleague turned out to be the easiest part of the process. What I struggled with was the whole process of ongoing information gathering, something Marshall Goldsmith calls *FeedForward*.

Upon the instruction of the consultant, during the months that followed I shamelessly promoted my message of self-improvement to my stakeholders. I spoke to them in person, on the phone and solicited their comments by email. After a conversation with a colleague, I might follow up with a quick email, “You know, I’m focusing on developing my listening skills. If you could take a minute, I’m interested in your thoughts. How do you prefer someone like me to show they are listening to what you have to say?” Or, driving back to the office with a colleague after a meeting I might ask, “I’ve been trying to strengthen my listening skills, what do you think I could do to improve?” I tried very hard not to ask others how I could improve on a given situation. Asking people for “Feedback” puts both parties in a potentially uncomfortable position. Concerns about possible repercussions of negative comments could cause others to hold back the truth, or the truth may result in hard feelings. *FeedForward* eliminates that problem by focusing on positive steps that can be taken now, rather than what may have gone wrong in the past.

At first, I felt awkward asking my stakeholders for their advice but keeping it casual helped. After a few conversations, I found people were getting pretty used to me coming to them with my, “I want to improve” message. I also realized that they were watching to see if it was all just a publicity stunt. (Seems I’m not the only cynic.) The spotlight was on me. If my stakeholders saw improvement, then I could feel good that I was achieving

my goal, I'd be a better leader, have more success, and be able to promote coaching within the ranks of my own department. If they saw no change, the loss in credibility would be devastating. Not long into it, I realized it was all about perception – theirs not mine. I learned to approach every day with resolve to display the behaviors people were telling me they wanted to see.

Peer Coaching Partnership

Together, my partner and I determined that meeting once per week would be all we could manage with our busy schedules. Soon this half hour meeting became one of the highlights of my week. Following an agenda, we would typically take five minutes each to review the previous week's feedback and successes, and then use the rest of the time to discuss something significant that happened that week – a challenge to our goal, something that was top of mind, a thought we've had about the other's situation. It is incredible how another person can cut through to the heart of an issue when they are not directly involved. We benefited from each other's experience as we shared ideas and best practices. Working with a colleague on difficult issues, I felt less isolated as a leader in the company. With the help of my partner I became more reflective about how I lead and I am sure that my own leadership development was hugely accelerated as a result.

Measurement

Improvement is in the eye of the beholder and those holding the spotlight on me, my stakeholders, were the people whose opinions mattered most. I collected input every day but my behavior was formally measured three times during the six-month pilot. To do this, an anonymous mini-survey went out to my stakeholders. Thankfully, my reported results were encouraging. After each round, I shared my results with my stakeholders and recommitted to my goal.

Six months later, the pilot has been declared a success. Not only have leadership ratings gone up across the board, but personal satisfaction and engagement in the workplace has gone up company wide. As for me, I have achieved my behavioral goals for listening, but I don't feel like I'm finished yet. I have begun work on my second area of focus and I continue to keep an eye on listening, so to speak.

Recently, my coaching partner and I have borrowed another suggestion from that Marshall Goldsmith article. We have each developed a list of questions, I have seven, my partner has ten. Every day, my partner and I have a quick phone call where we ask each other the same questions. A couple of my questions ask about whether I have practiced my listening skills. Knowing that I'm going to have to report on how I'm doing on these seven things keeps them top of mind for me and ensures that I'm doing those seven things everyday.

In retrospect, I think those mixed results for coaching programs may have something to do with how well a coaching program is designed. I also believe that, in order to have a good coaching experience, a person needs to identify a behavior that they truly are committed to changing – or a skill they truly wish to develop. If these personal goals are tied to bottom line organizational results, then everyone wins.