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CEO Skills:
The Art of Coaching

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The Art of Coaching

The Coaching Conversation

To Vistage speaker Agnes Mura, who coaches and teaches coaching skills to CEOs and senior executives, coaching is an ongoing process rather than a series of unconnected events. She considers coaching a process because:

- It involves a predictable progression toward an outcome.
- It has a clearly defined structure.
- The methods are transferable and teachable.
- It requires a collaborative environment.

One of Mura's coaching tools, which she calls the "Coaching Conversation,©" consists of five distinct steps.

1. **Establish goals.**

The first step involves setting short-term and long-term goals. Long-term goals include your mutual vision for the outcome of the coaching process and should be established in the first coaching session. Short-term goals define what should happen during each specific coaching session. Set these each time you meet.

2. **Promote discovery.**

The fundamental principle of all coaching is to promote insight and discovery about the problem being faced as well as about optional solutions. Your role as coach is to seek out your executive's ideas and share some of your own -- not just tell them what to do. To promote discovery:

- Quiet your mind and listen beyond the words.
- Ask powerful, open-ended questions.
- Paraphrase to show that you understand.
- Draw out the consequences by helping the client think aloud about what might happen if they undertake various courses of action.
- Share your own personal experiences as they relate to the issue at hand.

In particular, listen for the emotions, because feelings play a big role in the decision-making process. They also tell you how someone really feels about what they are saying. Advises Mura, “Also, pay close attention to nonverbal cues. In a conversation, words constitute less than ten percent of the total communication. The rest comes from the client’s body language and tone of voice.” It is important to linger in this discovery step and not rush into action planning until the issue and the optional solutions have been evaluated. Leaders are “activists” and tend to rush through this reflective stage.

3. **Determine a course of action.**

Once the problem is better understood and some optional solutions have been studied, in this third step you as coach guide the development of an action plan and help to define the parameters to guide actions. In this step, the coach invites his/her executive to identify what action they will take. For example, you might ask questions like, ‘Where should we go from here? Where would you like to begin? What do you think you should do next? What are you going to do about this?’ You should feel that you have stopped exploring and have begun moving toward the creation of an action plan.’

This involves:

- Clarifying the desired outcome
- Dividing large projects into smaller, more manageable pieces
- Identifying boundaries and resource parameters that will affect the planning, such as budgets, available resources, timelines and milestones
- Determining how the actions to be taken will fit within the executive’s life or organizational context and setting a target date for completion. Specificity makes this step most valuable.

4. **Authorize and empower.**

In step four, your executives need to know they have your full support. Help them identify any potential obstacles and ways to remove or get around them. This proactively eliminates any excuses for not following through on the action plan. It also gives the executive confidence they can do it. Finally, provide whatever support he or she needs to accomplish the action plan’s objectives.

5. **Recap.**

Ask your executive to review what you have covered in the coaching session. Then get clear agreement on what the client has committed to, when he or she will do it and the expected outcome. Next, reaffirm your approval of the action plan and any steps you have agreed to take to support it. Finally, and most importantly, have them reflect on what they learned for the future.

The executive must do the recap, not you. Otherwise, you can walk away with very different ideas about what occurred during the session and what is supposed to happen afterwards. If you find a discrepancy, back up and repeat steps three and four until you both are in agreement. And above all, don't forget to harvest the long-term insights that this problem solving exercise has generated for them.

This coaching conversation allows you to stay focused, even on the most difficult issues. It is predictable, it makes people feel safe, and -- most important -- it helps them accept the accountability needed to achieve their goals.

Key Coaching Skills

Five basic steps. Sounds easy, right?

Not so fast, cautions Mura. Although the process may seem simple, the skills required to implement it are not. Effective coaching demands a high-level ability to be present in the moment and stay closely attuned to needs and perceptions. It also requires a package of interpersonal skills that take time and practice to acquire. These skills include:

- **Contextual listening.** Listen beyond the words and pay close attention to tone of voice, body language and other nonverbal communication.
- **Gap bridging.** You must clarify where the executive is and where they need to go, then identify what they need to do to close the gap between the two. All coaching is about bridging gaps.

- **Discovery questioning.** Good coaches ask open-ended questions that come from a non-expert position. They don't pretend to have the answers. If your executive seems stuck, it may be appropriate to bring your answers into the conversation. If so, always present them in a generous rather than a judgmental framework.

- **Truth-telling.** As a coach, you will often be called upon to name the "white elephant" -- the things that are really going on in the conversation that the executive can't or won't identify. Coaches must tell the truth, even when it feels uncomfortable. This doesn't mean attack anyone. Instead, lay reality out on the table for both of you to see.

- **Celebrating.** A large part of your role involves affirming and celebrating the client's strengths, insights and accomplishments as you move through the process, a leadership skill insufficiently practiced yet vital to learning.

The hardest part for most CEOs is learning to listen. Ideally, you should talk only 20% of the time and the executive 80% of the time. CEOs also have a tendency to jump in and solve the problem, which defeats the whole purpose of coaching. Keep in mind that your job is to help identify and explore the implications of possible solutions, not to provide them.

Also, beware of persuading and asking too many leading questions. If you do ask a leading question, offer it as an option rather than advocating a particular course of action. Instead of recommending a certain action, ask, 'If you did this, what might happen?'"

When coaching:

- Always ask permission to coach. For example, have a contract.
- Establish agreement on where, when and how long you will coach -- even if it's as informal as, "Shall we take 10 minutes in the conference room now to see if we can get you unstuck on this issue?"
- Involve the executive in designing the coaching process.

"When you allow people to help design the process, it builds trust in the relationship and allows you to follow the individual's learning style," explains Mura. "They feel safer and become more open to being coached. More important, they buy into the process and invest more of themselves in achieving the desired outcome."

Managing Risk in Coaching Situations

On occasion, coaching conversations can venture into areas so sensitive that the person refuses to discuss the issue. For whatever reason, they feel the risk of exploring the issue outweighs any potential gain they might derive from the conversation. At those times, using a risk manager can help the person open up to the issue and move forward with their personal growth.

People avoid taking risks for many reasons, the main one being a fear of consequences if something goes wrong. Yet, in order to grow, people sometimes have to go places they haven't gone and do things they have never done before. Most people won't venture outside their comfort zones without some way to manage that risk.

To encourage people to take risks in the coaching process, consider the following process:

1. Identify the issue being avoided.

This step is not always as simple as it seems. You may need to probe a bit to make sure you have the right issue.

2. Identify the risks associated with the issue.

Ask, "What are the risks involved in discussing this issue? What might happen if we dig into this a bit deeper?" Examples of perceived risks include :

- Fear of getting too emotional (i.e., crying) in front of you
- Fear of embarrassment
- Fear of losing face (self-esteem)
- Fear of retribution from the boss

Each of these represents a legitimate risk, but there could be more. Make sure you get all the risks out in the open before moving on.

The second part of this step involves honoring and validating the person's concerns. Never minimize, discount or attempt to talk someone out of a risk. Instead, assume that each risk is valid and treat it accordingly.

No matter how well-intentioned, responses like, ‘Oh, that's not such a big deal' or ‘What would be so embarrassing about that?' do not help. The person needs to know that you hear, understand and respect what they are saying. The slightest hint of judgment on your part can cause them to shut down.

3. Create a risk manager.

Once you have identified and acknowledged the risks, the next step involves creating a "risk manager," a mutual agreement to remain hyper-alert to anything in the conversation that heightens the risk and to take immediate action to decrease that risk.

Start out by inquiring about what might decrease the risk of talking about the issue. In many cases, the person will say something like, "Just mentioning that this feels risky has decreased the risk a bit. But it could rise again." You can respond with, "Okay. If we decide to move forward with this conversation, we could agree to stop it any time we feel an increase in the risk. Would that work for you?"

If the person agrees, you can then say, "What I'm hearing is that we need to stop the conversation any time the risk begins to rise. I will count on you to let me know when that happens. I, too, will closely monitor the risk level. If I feel it increasing, I will stop the conversation and we can talk about it. Will this work for you?" In most cases, the person will answer in the affirmative.

The process is fairly straightforward, but it requires your full attention. The person agrees to inform you when something comes up in the conversation that increases their perception of risk. You promise to stop the conversation at that point and explore what is going on. Plus, you also agree to keep a close watch for any signs of increased risk.

Interestingly, the difference between the risk and the *awareness* of the risk reveals a lot more than the actual issue because it allows you to witness how the person functions moment to moment in daily life. People make decisions based on their experienced risk and degree of risk aversion. Once you understand how this works, you have an important window into the person's decision-making process.

4. Address the issue.

By now, the person should be ready to discuss the issue, at which point you use all the standard coaching tools -- probing questions, active listening, paraphrasing and repeating the emotionally charged phrases. Tune in very closely to where the person is in the moment and where they appear to be going.

5. Manage any new risks that arise.

During the course of discussing the issue, new risks may arise. If so, repeat steps two through four.

6. Integrate the process.

To wrap up, assess what took place during the discussion. Ask, "What have we learned/accomplished today and where should we go from here? What is our next step?" Then ask the person to commit to one action that will further the process of getting to where he or she wants to go.

"Managing risk is situational," explains Bob Neiderman. "This process works because it helps the person identify what would make the risk more manageable in the moment. One way to manage that risk is simply to call a halt to the process. Before diving into the issue, create the awareness that it's okay to stop the conversation and then get agreement that either one of you can call time out if things get too stressful."

Once the person feels like most of the risk has been removed, they will almost always engage in conversation about the issue. In many cases, they experience a great sense of relief to finally get things out in the open. You still have to step carefully because risk can rear its head at any time. But once you have the issue out on the table, you can use all your coaching skills to help the person process it and move forward to resolution.

If you have any questions about this article or you would like information on Vistage International, the world's largest CEO organization, contact Clay Garner. Clay is the president of Growth Resources, Inc. and chairs several Vistage groups in the Chicagoland area. He can be reached at 847-208-8709 or cgarner@growthresource.com.