In this article, coaching is presented as a human resources management approach and not as a technique applied in isolation. Today, some large organizations such as AT&T and IBM have replaced the word manager with coach to reflect a commitment to a cultural change where development and growth are highly valued. In addition to managing product, process and financial decisions, managers as coaches are very mindful and capable of sound human resources management practices. Contrary to traditional managers who focused on top and bottom performers, managers as coaches identify those competencies that distinguish top from average performers and try to help everyone develop them. The goal is to increase the overall capability in the organization. Achieving this entails a management approach that focuses on building all employees’ potential and resources, including low, average and high performers. This human resources management approach is coaching.

Coaching: A historic perspective

The word coaching was first used in English in the 1500s to refer to a particular kind of carriage. Hence to coach people is to facilitate their moving from one place to another but without carrying them. For decades, athletes, public speakers and performance artists have turned to coaches to help them do better. Within organizations, coaching took place, in its earlier forms, during performance appraisals, once a year and without follow-up. For the past 20 years, coaching has appeared in the literature as a management development technique. Writings on coaching also contain elements related to mentoring and team building. Recent discussions focus on coaching as a tool for organizational change through senior executives. Today, rather than involving a specific problem area and a limited proportion of the workforce, coaching is proposed as a management approach that involves the whole person and the whole organization.

THE MANAGER’S CORNER

The manager as coach

Aïda Warah

The biggest challenge in human resources management has always been the question of how to unlock and mobilize employees’ potential.

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*Nothing in this article should be taken as reflecting the position of the Public Service Commission.

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Coaching approaches

There are two basic approaches to coaching inspired by two different schools of thought in psychology: behaviourism and humanism. When coaching is based on behavioural modification principles, coaches take charge of the coaching situation. They observe and assess the coachees, identify a problem to be fixed, set goals and design an action plan. Coaches are also responsible for finding ways to motivate the coachees to follow through with the action plan. An advantage of this approach is the production of specific results in specific areas. Also, the coaching process is easily managed.

According to the humanistic approach, we are free and responsible beings with a natural tendency for growth and self-actualization. The main role of coaches is to facilitate rather than dictate. They help the coachees increase self-awareness, self-directed behaviour and, consequently, growth. Through exchanges similar to those occurring in the counselling process, goals are articulated, as are possible obstacles to reaching them. Obstacles may be psychological such as limiting self-perceptions and other restricting beliefs. The focus is on the whole person including their values, beliefs and self-perceptions and not simply on isolated behaviour. In this approach, the coaches and the coachees co-create the coaching process, working together towards goals that are primarily set by the coachees.

In both approaches, goals are set, action plans are developed and feedback given. The humanistic approach promotes growth and self-directed behaviour through self-awareness. Self-awareness and self-reflection are key abilities necessary for the self-corrective behaviours displayed by expert learners. I believe that in a time of constant change and increased uncertainty, individuals who have good self-reflective and self-corrective skills may use more creative problem-solving strategies than individuals who are mostly reactive.

Research on the counselling process, which is structurally similar to coaching, shows that the counselling relationship most conducive to personal growth is a collaborative and synergistic one. In a collaborative relationship, the coaches and coachees co-create the coaching or counselling process. Neither is always in charge, directing nor being directed. The coaches or counsellors move ahead of the coachees at times but wait by the sidelines at other times. Good coaches know when to push and when to support; good coachees know how to receive and integrate. They listen and build on each other’s ideas to take the process further and further at every step of the way. A coaching approach that combines principles from both the behavioural and the humanistic orientations promotes this synergistic relationship, which is, as elucidated in the next section, at the core of the coaching process.

The seven key components of coaching

Coaching as a management approach has seven key components that most coaches refer to in one way or another. At the core of coaching there should be a relationship based on mutuality and partnership. A supervisory role is not sufficient for successful coaching, in the absence of other elements. In other words, managers cannot successfully coach their subordinates simply by virtue of their formal relationship.

A second component of the coaching process is to recognize opportunities for coaching. Managers as coaches assess where things are with the coachees and see problems, misfits or breakdowns as learning opportunities. The purpose of this assessment is neither to blame nor punish but to guide, appreciate and create. To offset the general tendency to focus on problem areas when assessing someone, it is recommended that managers make a special effort to recognize and acknowledge the employees’ strengths and unique contributions at work. Some meetings may be designated specifically and solely for the discussion of strengths and contributions. This can enhance the mutual trust that is so critical for the coaching relationship.

It is also critical that employees get involved in the assessment process rather than receive a ready-made report on their performance. However, there may be situations where employees are not aware of their potential or their shortcomings. In those situations, managers have the responsibility to draw the employees’ attention to these characteristics and their impact on others and help them take the necessary measures. Managers should open a dialogue with their employees to help them see what is not readily apparent to them. Psychometric tools such as personality inventories and full-circle appraisals can be used in conjunction with daily observations to assess style, preferences, interpersonal skills and other skills. These tools are administered and interpreted by professionals such as psychologists and career counsellors.
A third component in the coaching process is contracting. Despite having the status of manager, it is still necessary to elicit the employees’ agreement to be coached. The coaching then becomes a partnership venture that is the responsibility of both partners. At this stage, managers and employees have already jointly defined strengths and developmental areas. They now have to agree to take action.

Goal setting is the fourth key component in coaching. Here the coaches and coachees collaboratively set goals and desired outcomes in light of a common vision. Time lines need to be set at this stage as well. For example, some employees may have a tendency to stonewall every time a colleague disagrees with them. One goal may be that they express their feelings and opinions openly, directly and in a timely manner to achieve a better flow of information between the team members or the working group. In this example, there may be sub-goals as well, to maximize the likelihood of success. The links between goals and desired outcomes need to be clearly articulated to increase the employees’ commitment to change. When setting goals, it should be kept in mind that, strictly speaking, control can be exercised only over very short-term or micro-goals. This means that the best way to reach our goals is to break them down into attainable sub-goals. Coaches use a wide variety of dialogue-based techniques to help coachees move toward the targets. For instance, they may challenge coachees with a question (confrontation), provide support during tough moments or help them see a situation from different perspectives.

A fifth component is setting a feedback mechanism. Regular and frequent feedback is essential in any learning experience, but most people do not use feedback optimally. Many managers still wait until performance appraisal day to give feedback and many do not give enough positive feedback. Most managers are very uncomfortable giving tough feedback. Good or bad, most employees say they want to know how they are doing. What holds people back from giving tough feedback is fear: fear of hurting others’ feelings, fear of being criticized in return, fear of retaliation, fear of rocking the boat and compromising one’s job, fear of losing popularity and fear of having one’s self-image challenged. Timely and honest feedback has the sole purpose of promoting growth and improvement. So, before giving feedback, managers should always check their real motives; if their motive is to put employees down, to ventilate or to merely assert superiority and control, then feedback should be withheld.

The sixth component in coaching is monitoring progress or regression outcomes. Movement towards the set goals, even if small, should be recognized. Also, derailment needs to be acknowledged and discussed. The coaches and coachees decide together on how frequently they will meet to assess progress and to set new goals. They may need to experiment initially with different schedules until they settle on one. Flexibility is a must in this approach. The coaches and coachees must always be ready to try different strategies to find what works for them or for a particular situation.

Finally, managers/coaches must be ready for possible breakdowns in the form of resistance and ego struggles. When things do not work out, coaches and coachees should refrain from blaming themselves or someone else. They need to be ready to handle resistance by seeing it as part of the process and by learning from it. Managers/coaches must be sensitive to self-esteem issues, but they should not be afraid to confront them either. If either the coaches or coachees feel stuck in a transaction, they should check for possible ego struggles. Even though under normal circumstances we do not try to cover up our mistakes in front of our coaches and we do not try to impress them with how much we know, it could happen as a self-protective measure. If managers suspect that a self-protective behaviour is being displayed by their coachees, such as trying to look good or to know it all, they should constructively challenge them with a question, rather than an accusation. For example, asking “Is it possible that you ...?” invites reflection, whereas declaring “You do such and such ...” may provoke defensiveness.

Effective coaching promotes growth and enhances performance. Good coaches use a variety of strategies and techniques to help their coachees achieve incremental changes and to move gradually to higher levels of performance. Coaches who truly care are not afraid to tell their coachees what might be very difficult to hear, because what really matters to them is promoting real growth and not putting on social facades.

Coaching and organizational cultures

Coaching as a management approach may have more success in organizational cultures that embrace horizontal models of leadership than in those that support hierarchical models. Horizontal models of leadership include a certain set of values that guide how members of an organization
relate to one another and how they conduct business. Organizations that are considering the use of coaching as a human resources management tool need to assess and articulate the values that guide their business practices and to adopt those that fit into horizontal leadership models. The following are examples of these values and the types of behaviours that these values guide:

- **Respect**
  - Acknowledging differences, including strengths and weaknesses
  - Acknowledging everyone’s contributions
  - Being sensitive to others’ developmental needs (ignoring someone’s need to work on certain areas does not communicate respect)
  - Celebrating excellence
  - Abstaining from any form of harassment
  - Soliciting input from others for decisions that affect them.

- **Openness**
  - Communicating clearly, honestly and in a timely and multidirectional fashion
  - Sharing information
  - Giving and receiving feedback to promote growth
  - Coordinating services with others to avoid duplication or working at cross purposes and to optimize effectiveness.

- **Development**
  - Engaging in self-care activities/practices
  - Learning continuously
  - Forgiving (self and others)
  - Promoting others’ growth and welfare.

- **Service**
  - Responding to and seeking input from clients
  - Going the extra mile
  - Honouring commitments.

- **Pride and Integrity**
  - Taking pride in individual achievements and in making a positive difference
  - Seeing work as self-expression
  - Collaborating and taking pride in common goals
  - Walking the talk.

These values affect and support one another synergistically. Success in using them is achieved in a context of trust where people believe and feel that the “system” would not punish them if they used them.

**Conclusions**

Coaching as a management approach is far more than an event that takes place once a year during performance appraisals. It is a continuous process that requires skill, depth of understanding of human nature and plenty of practice to deliver its potential. The biggest challenge in human resources management has always been the question of how to unlock and mobilize employees’ potential. The idea of the manager as a coach is not really new, but it is all the more relevant today in an organizational context that demands the best from each one of us.