

Yet another 'people are your biggest asset' article

But don't give up on me yet, this one's a bit different

I'm going to assume that you've been indoctrinated with the same concepts that I have. You need to invest in your people to prevent them from leaving because it's cheaper to retain than recruit. Additionally you need to keep them happy (whatever that means) because contented workers are better contributors. Now don't get me wrong, I don't disagree with that, but let's face it we can't afford to double everyone's salary while halving their hours (that actually wouldn't work, but that's a different article).

In this article I want to explore practical ways to get long term benefits from your people. Let me make a commitment to you right now – if you stay with me through this article I'll give you some practical techniques that you can use with your people right now, if I fail let me know and I'll work with you to explore the situation you are facing.

The Coaching and Mentoring partnership

Before I get into the meat of this article let me start by defining a couple of key concepts. Everyone has an understanding of coaching and mentoring, but unfortunately we don't all have the same understanding. For the purposes of this article here is what I mean.

- Coaching is the provision of personal job and / or skill related assistance backed up by SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time-bound) action plans which are monitored and followed up on. It may be initiated by the coach or the person being coached.
- Mentoring is the provision of confidential, personal, career and / or skill related assistance, backed up by aspirational goals which are monitored and followed up on. Mentoring is always initiated by the mentee.

You don't have to agree with these definitions, but this is what I mean when I talk about coaching and mentoring.

To use a cliché, for best results – do both. Coaching can be very successful in and of itself, and so too can mentoring, but this really is a situation where one plus one equals three. This isn't always easy, it takes effort from everyone involved – coach, mentor and the individual being coached / mentored, and for that reason this isn't for everyone. To truly be successful at this you need to identify your future stars and focus your efforts on them. Everyone else isn't ignored, you still focus on developing them, improving their performance today, building career paths, etc, but you need to be selfish – you have to concentrate on the people who can give you the biggest return on your investment.

I'm deliberately avoiding stating what percentage of people you select – that's up to you, but don't spread your efforts too thin. Most importantly don't lose sight of one key word in the previous paragraph. You are looking for your future stars, the people who are capable of leading your company five to ten years from now. They may be your current stars, but they may not be – they may even be underperforming if they aren't being challenged enough.

The first step – Coaching

Re-read my definition of coaching – it isn't just helping someone to do their job. The purpose of coaching is to increase performance today while providing a solid foundation for future performance. Yes it's important to help people discover solutions themselves, but it's also important to give them context to those solutions. Help your staff to understand what their work is contributing to – if they are being asked to analyse the merits of a particular approach then make sure that they understand the factors that help to determine how important those merits are – the strategic factors that you as leaders live with daily, but that your team may not be exposed to.

That isn't the end of it though – coaching isn't teaching. You need to ensure that the coaching is producing results – if someone is receiving significant amounts of your time (and it is time consuming) then there has to be a return on that

investment. You need to see a lift in the coached employee's job performance, an improvement in their skills, and you need to be able to measure that improvement and act if it isn't good enough.

Let's get a little more specific. Imagine that you have a major presentation to prepare for your boss. The meeting is two weeks away, and that gives you enough time to coach one of your team through the process of creating the presentation. This also implies that you have the time to spend on it as well – good coaching will take longer than doing it yourself. Here are the steps I propose:

- Promise to yourself that you will never take the task back and do it yourself – and keep the promise!
- Sit down with the individual and discuss the task – provide the background – what is it for, why now, what forum, who are the audience, what background work has already been done, what are the next steps going to be after the presentation, what mediums are you expected to use, etc
- Get the individual's thoughts on the key issues that they need to address – what are the main points of the presentation going to be, who else needs to help pulling the information together, what are the roadblocks (including potentially the coached person's regular job responsibilities), etc. Ask questions, challenge assumptions, but never give answers
- Work together to agree on a plan. You need to ensure that you have regular checkpoints – you want to be able to ensure that the presentation is coming together the right way without having to make wholesale changes – checking direction once a day is a lot better than backtracking after three days. Above all, make yourself available when you say you will be – a coach is no use if they aren't there.
- When you review progress make sure that the individual is explaining why they have taken the approach that they have. This helps you understand their thought process, and adjust if necessary, but more importantly it makes the person being coached think through the various issues and will likely cause them to realise and correct their mistakes without you having to help them through the process.
- Your attitude is everything during this process – you need to be encouraging without blindly praising work that isn't where it needs to be; you need to manage expectations – the first effort isn't going to be perfect but that's no reason for the coach or the individual to give up – it's a baseline for improvement. At the same time if the quality isn't good enough then this message has to be delivered – in a positive, forward looking way, but never doubting that the work needs to get better.
- Once the presentation is complete make sure that recognition is given – if you can't include the individual in the meeting when the presentation is presented then at least make sure that feedback on how the meeting went is given – preferably by someone other than you, and then make sure that you review the results and push the coached staff member to identify ways that it can be improved next time.

There are some implications with the above. First off you need to choose the work items to use for coaching carefully. I made the assumption that you were providing your employee an opportunity to expand their role by working on something that you are directly accountable for. This may be true, but it may also be something that is part of their work. Either way, your early work items that you choose for coaching should not be business critical initiatives – you want to build their confidence by allowing them to do the work and the last thing that you (or they) need is to have to take over in order to ensure that the business doesn't suffer.

The second key point here is that when you review the outcome and the lessons you need to concentrate on lessons that you can put into practise in the short term. You want to identify and implement the next coaching opportunity as soon as possible after the first, so think about what lessons carry forward and focus there – it's another way to build confidence.

You can see that this is a lot of work, and there are no short cuts if you want to do it properly. You may be able to leverage your people by asking two or three of them to work together on the initiative, but be careful – you want to build a synergistic relationship not create internal conflict.

The second step – Mentoring

Coaching is hard work, there's no doubt about it, but it delivers relatively quick results and is therefore not that difficult to commit to, either for the coach or the employee. Mentoring is harder for both sides, and the outcome is a lot less predictable, but when it works the results are dramatic.

Re-read my definition of mentoring above, and let me reinforce the golden rule – mentoring is always initiated by the mentee. Always.

You can assign someone a coach, and logically it is often the line manager, but you can't assign someone a mentor. Mentoring is personal, it requires the employee to reveal their ambitions, sometimes their fears, and that requires both commitment to the process, and a level of comfort with the mentor.

I said at the start of this article that when mentoring and coaching combine the results are enhanced. When an individual is coached they are receiving a lot of attention and developing a lot of skills. They will also have times when they feel like they are on a path to greatness and times when they feel that they have failed completely. If the individual has someone they can use to help them process the lessons, consider what they mean to them, and most importantly put them into perspective, then they will have a much easier time with the coaching aspects.

The problem with mentoring is that it is extremely difficult to manage. The individual may not choose a mentor who is even part of your company, in fact unless it is a large company the mentor probably won't be part of the company – there needs to be real and perceived independence that is very difficult to achieve if the mentor has a management relationship (or a relationship with the manager), whether that be direct or indirect. It's not that a mentor can't work if there is a close working relationship, but there may not be the ability to be completely open.

The cornerstone of mentoring is based on career planning. That's not to say that mentoring is only concerned with careers, it isn't, but it is focused on positioning the individual to be successful in the medium to long term, and inevitably with people who have the potential to be successful, career advancement is a key element of that.

So how do you help a member of your team find a mentor? Some people may already have a mentor, although they may not realise it. Often it's a former manager or senior colleague with whom the individual still maintains a social relationship. This is an ideal foundation, the trust already exists and a more formal, development focused conversation shouldn't be a difficult transition. You can also find senior people in your organisation who are willing to be mentors and try and match up people based on similar personalities, experiences, etc – although as mentioned above this may not work if the company is small and the proposed mentor is perceived as being too close to the individual's line management. You may also be able to find people through trade associations, chambers of commerce, etc. If there are no other options then you may be able to pair up two people who are being coached, or find someone who went through coaching a while ago. As a leader in your organisation you should also look to be a mentor, to someone in another part of the company, to a former member of your team, etc.

Mentoring is not the same as coaching, and it can't be approached in the same way, but there are similarities in approach. It is crucial that the mentee is the person who finds the ultimate solutions as they have to believe in them and see them through to completion. It is also important to follow up on agreed actions. The key items are:

- Build a personal connection. The mentor and the individual being mentored need to have inherent trust in one another. They don't need to be friends, but they do need to be able to communicate with one another with complete openness if the relationship is going to work. It's not unusual for the first few meetings to be nothing more than getting to know one another sessions (hence why a mentor that is selected by the individual based on an existing relationship is always a good idea)
- Be prepared for change. Mentoring is a different type of relationship and it may not work, you need to be prepared to help the mentee find a new mentor if there isn't the connection with the first. Similarly if you are acting as a mentor you need to be completely honest about whether it is working
- The mentor is there to help the individual make decisions, not make them on their behalf. It's not unusual as a mentor to be faced with the question "what do you think I should do about..." Often this is looking for reassurance that the course of action that the person is considering is correct, but there really isn't a right answer – agree with their thoughts and analysis of the pros and cons stops, disagree and the self doubt begins. Instead you need to help the person work through the various benefits and compromises of each choice. Get them to personalise what the change will mean, and try and avoid any personal bias
- Create an action plan and follow up on it. If the individual you are mentoring says that they think they can be running the company in ten years, then work with them to establish a path that will get them there – where do they need to be in five years, what skills do they need to develop within two years, etc. That action plan should then

be reviewed and adjusted as time goes on, to reflect changing positions, developing skills and potentially different ambitions. Your first reaction may be to laugh at an ambition to run the company, but someone has to do it!

- Never let your mentee down. They are putting an immense amount of trust in you as a mentor, sharing ambitions that they may not even have voiced with their family. They need to be sure that the trust that they have put in you is not misplaced. The damage done to an individual who discovers that their mentor has betrayed their trust is immeasurable
- Be available. Mentoring discussions may only take place two or three times a year, but if the person you are mentoring wants to discuss something then you need to find time for them, because this is an important discussion for the individual

Working to implement a mentoring program can be tough. Not only is it difficult to achieve, the results take time to develop, and the impact may be considerable. It is entirely possible that a mentor and mentee have to seriously consider a change in employer if the person's goals are to be achieved, and that can be hard to accept. Ultimately though, few people will leave who were not going to leave anyway, and those that stay will be there through conscious choice with skills and experience specifically tailored for the contribution that they want to make to your company. It doesn't take too many people like that in leadership positions to have world class management.

The implications of Coaching and Mentoring

At this point most 'people are your greatest asset' articles will stop, but I have one other point to make – hang in there, I'm nearly through.

A coaching and mentoring program is a wonderful thing, but it does have implications on your company beyond the time and effort required. By definition you are creating a class structure among your employees – those that are being coached and mentored, and those who aren't. There is nothing wrong with that – you have to focus your efforts where the potential is, but you have to manage the implications. There may be jealousy and resentment among the employees who aren't on the program, and there may be an air of superiority from those that are – their personalities would make it likely.

With the people on the program you can use it as part of the coaching – an opportunity to demonstrate maturity, ability to conduct themselves, etc, and if they don't respond then take appropriate action. With the members of your team that aren't selected it can be harder, and unfortunately there is no guaranteed answer. Focus on what your company is doing for them in terms of development – training, development plans, etc, and don't be afraid to say that you don't feel that they are ready for more at this point. Some will be determined to prove you wrong, and that tells you something about them, others will give up – and that tells you more. Just be prepared to act on that knowledge.

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