

When the Coach is the Supervisor: Dealing with the Dynamics of Power and the Organization

by Lou Raye Nichol

A supervisor taking the role of coach has to deal with more complex dynamics than does an external coach. Firstly, the power relationship between the supervisor and subordinate has a reality outside the coaching relationship. Secondly, the coach has first-hand knowledge of the subordinate's performance. Thirdly, the coach has duties to the organization in relation to the subordinate's performance. This has implications for the coach in managing boundaries between coaching and non-coaching activities, and the coach's ability to do this will make or break the trust necessary to a successful coaching relationship.

Supervisor/Coach Assumptions

Supervisor as coach will not work unless the supervisor holds a basic tenet that people want to work and to grow in their work. Of course this tenet will be challenged and disproved at times; however, if she begins with the opposite assumption that people do not want to work and have to be coerced and controlled in order to get good performance, then the burden of insuring performance falls on the supervisor, and her options are limited to authoritarian leadership.

The supervisor also needs to be sensitive to the fact that coaching is a difficult process at the best of times because of necessary discussions around areas of difficulty. If the coach has power over the client's advancement, then the value of entering into such discussions must be clear to both and shared by both. For example, the coach would want to let it be understood that she values the capacity for learning as much as current satisfactory performance.

Developing a Framework for Supervisor Coaching

The coaching contract sets the stage for managing the complexities of the coaching/supervision roles. The contract will include many of the same points as a contract with an external coach such as mutual expectations, organizational expectations, and models and ways of working together, but additional issues will need to be discussed. Canceling sessions, lateness, or non-attendance is often a way that both coach and subordinate may act out their ambivalence to the process, so it is useful to give special attention to such questions as: Is attendance voluntary or compulsory? Under what circumstances can coaching sessions be canceled? What are the consequences of non-attendance?

The coach will also want to initiate discussions of how the role of coach relates to her oversight role. Clarity on these boundaries will help to develop trust to discuss work issues openly. You will want to explain such things as how records are kept and the relation of coaching to appraisal. It is important that the subordinate have a measure of power in these other processes so that there is not too great a discrepancy between them and coaching.

The stage can also be set by discussing how coach and client manage the boundary between coaching and other activities. For instance, session agendas are usually set by the subordinate, however, the coach may notice things outside sessions that she thinks need to be introduced for the purpose of exploration and learning, not reprimand. The coach must, of course, carry through in that spirit. The coach must also be clear that she will not punish the subordinate for mistakes discussed in coaching, however there are limits to confidentiality. The coach will have certain legal and organizational responsibilities to report some pieces of information. For instance, management and individual managers may be legally responsible if they are aware of sexual harassment in the workplace and do nothing. Once informed of the limits of confidentiality, the subordinate can decide whether to bring certain items to the coaching agenda.

Necessary Organization Support

Successful coaching by supervisors is best supported by the organization when it has clear expectations of employees based on shared mission, vision and goals and when the values of coaching are aligned with accountability and reward structures. In such a case, the task of the coach is to help the employee examine his activity in the light of how it is supporting organizational and personal objectives. If, however, the real message is "Do what the boss tells you to do." then people learn very quickly, and coaching becomes an empty ritual.

As an example, I worked for a number of years in one organization where coaching was part of the management process and appraisal was part of the coaching process. The appraisal was a joint discussion between supervisor and worker in which the two reviewed the work of the past year and set goals and performance measures for the next year. Once goals were set, then training needs were identified, and the organization provided either internal or external training to meet those needs. The appraisal was recorded in a document that included evaluation of both the subordinate and the supervisor and was signed by both. The appraisal form also provided opportunity to document areas of disagreement if they occurred.

This system was a good one, but it worked with greater or lesser effectiveness depending on where you were located in the organization. The operations departments of the organization was organized into teams, and people took the process seriously. Appraisal was an generally an open and fair process, and the necessary training that went with it was consistently provided.

Further up the hierarchy of the organization, political jostling was the prevalent modis operandi , and with the exception of one key person, neither coaching nor appraisal were given much berth. It is often the case that different cultures prevail at different levels in an organization. A consequence for this may be that while the organization espouses support for coaching, the structure may undermine it by not providing necessary support for coaches.

Support for coaching is needed because the supervisor will be caught up in the same interpersonal and organizational processes that she is working to help subordinates deal with. She will also have concerns about her level of skills and questions of accountability. If coaching is done in a pyramid fashion that reflects the hierarchy of the organization, the process may 'top out' at the level where the culture

changes. So for instance, a middle manager who is coaching supervisors, who coach workers, may find that there is no one above her to coach and support her. She will need this help to maintain her effectiveness and energy in the role. Organizations have typically provided this either with external coaches or with designated coaches in the human resources staff.

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