



What's the Buzz? Coaching Conversations for a Fast-Paced Environment

Coaching was once reserved for top leadership. Now organizations are abuzz with coaching conversations at every level because the pace of change requires leadership at all levels.

- By Ingrid Johnson

Ara Parseghian was an outstanding football coach who brought Notre Dame's football program out of the trenches and into national championship status in 1966 and 1973. Team coaches are famous for having insight into what motivates people and are pros at teaching them to be team players.

One of Parseghian's wisdoms applies very much to the business world: "A good coach will make his players see what they can be rather than what they are."

Coaching as a business strategy for leadership improvement has transformed into a strategy for creating an organizational culture that is dynamic, adaptable to change and defined by a high level of employee engagement. Coaching can help all people in the company see what they can be as their most productive and creative selves rather than being confined by a title or position.

Adapting to the Forces of Change

Unrelenting, fast-paced change defines the business environment today, creating a need for adaptive leadership and a workforce that embraces personal responsibility for reaching its highest level of competency and peak capacity performance.

Coaching was originally introduced into the workplace as a senior leadership development strategy, with only a select few chosen to participate. Over time, coaching began to flow downward through the organization from executive to senior to mid-management levels because it became apparent that coaching conversations can benefit everyone, either through participation in a coaching arrangement or through coached leaders applying new skills.

The forces of change in the organization requires its members to be collaborative, good at problem solving, have a global perspective, able to manage complex value chains, and productively interact with external stakeholders. Leaders at the top cannot do all of this unless they build organizations that are engaged, empowered and innovative.

Successful organizations today are not directed by one powerful leader because power is no longer amassed in single individuals based on position. Social media and the ability to network without regard to position has pushed power into the workforce where it is based on factors like adaptability, collaborativeness, innovativeness, inclusiveness and other qualities, all of which can be developed through effective coaching.

Obviously it is not possible to hire a professional coach for each employee, but it is critical that a coaching culture be developed. In a coaching culture, leaders are coached and then become interveners in the workplace, holding regular conversations with their teams and employees that are designed to direct people toward a mutually accepted goal. The coached become the coaches.

When a coaching culture exists, the conversations between leaders and their team members are designed to promote continual improvement. There are different types of coaching which include



performance coaching, leadership coaching, career coaching and so on. Performance coaching feedback strengthens employee skills and the ability to attain stretch goals. Leadership coaching feedback is designed to develop effective and strategic decision-making capabilities amidst fast-paced change and the ability to motivate and engage teams. Career coaching provides feedback focused on career development. Common to every type of coaching process at any level is feedback which is a type of conversation.

Short Conversations

Coaching conversations do not have to be long-drawn-out affairs. In fact, they can be brief but regular and productive and always encouraging diversity of thought, personal best effort, continuous learning, knowledge sharing, and self-leadership development. The effective but brief coaching conversations involve several strategies that are designed to help the leader, team member and employee develop the ability to problem-solve, innovate and develop.

The first point to keep in mind is that the coach does not tell the coached what to do. Instead, the coach asks questions to help the employee find solutions as a result of his or her own thought processes and creative thinking. Question-and-answer conversations can also lead to mutual agreement on priorities, goals, solutions, etc. Another strategy is to focus on the development process rather than a particular task. How does the work in progress mesh with organizational goals?

Coaching conversations should occur when the moment is right – when there is an opportunity to reinforce a learning experience. Effective coaching conversations are focused on critical outcomes which reinforces the connection between meaningful work and organizational success. The art of the conversation is found in strategies like paraphrasing, open-ended questions, facilitative listening, guidance through comments and suggestions.

One of the advantages of the coaching conversation approach is that it can be used with individuals or groups like project teams.

Get the Coaching Conversation Right

Power is now dispersed throughout organizations and each person in the organization needs to assume a leadership role in his or her position. Executives and managers at all levels should not wait for formal opportunities to facilitate conversations with their staff or team members.

Coaching conversations are intended to empower rather than control, an important goal in a dynamic business environment where it is critical that each person strive for excellence. The conversations should help the coached align personal needs to the shared needs of the organization. Good leaders utilize coaching conversations to motivate employees to develop a top-performing team.

Coaching was once reserved only for executive and senior leadership. Now it is a corporate-wide strategy for developing a mission-driven mindset. That cannot happen only at the top. Coaching conversations should take place at every level of the organization and actively involve people in seeing options for solutions, developing new approaches, identifying positive outcomes and defining accountability.



The rate of change in the marketplace is likely to accelerate, not slow down, meaning businesses that want to create full value and remain innovative need every employee stretching. Get the conversations right and out of the process will come the next generation of leaders.

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