



Keeping Short Coaching Sessions on Target for Long-Term Results

Keeping coaching sessions tightly focused on the needs of the coached person will produce excellence in brief sessions.

If asked, most coaches would probably say they prefer to start a coaching program with the understanding it will include as many sessions as required based on the client's needs. They would likely add that each session should take as long as necessary to work through feedback issues. However, coaches are dealing with leaders who have reached their positions because they are able to efficiently set goals, map out strategies, and efficiently execute them.

They are juggling multiple responsibilities and sitting down to 'have a long chat' with a coach will hold little appeal. Coaching sessions might be brief, but that does not change the end goal. Companies investing resources in professional coaching programs expect a return on investment. Fortunately, with the right approach, the short coaching sessions can be just as effective as longer ones.

Coaching can play an important role in developing leadership, but corporations can ill afford to have critical staff tied up in long sessions. Despite the fact that coaching is associated with better performance through the delivery of customized development opportunities, it still has an image problem in some ways because of the difficulty in making a direct association between investment in the program and a measurable return on investment (ROI). Yet ROI is the language of leaders, so the first rule of thumb is to develop clear goals and expectations for each coaching session, no matter how brief. It is important to resist the temptation to lower expectations when time is short because that jeopardizes the entire program. The length of the session is not of importance. It is the results of the session that count.

What Fits in the Session?

Assume there is good chemistry between the coach and the staff member, and the coached person is motivated to increase self-awareness to enhance leadership capabilities. It is now up to the coach to design the session to achieve maximum results in the allotted session time. Using the language of leaders, the coach has to set goals for each session based on assessments of the coachee's needs. Coaching is not designed to fix behavior problems. It is meant to help leaders or potential leaders learn and grow. If the sessions devolve into the equivalent of 'reprimand' conversations, the effectiveness of coaching is lost. The coaching conversations have to be targeted and support the reasons why coaching was started in the first place. Reasons include leadership development, succession planning, improving work performance, taking organizational performance to the next level, increasing employee engagement, and improving talent retention rates. Each coaching session should correlate to the reason for coaching. Coaching is a fluid process in that, in the absence of



coaching expertise, focus can easily shift from business performance to personal issues. The reality is that short sessions of coaching need to address clearly defined business issues to keep conversations on topic.

German-speaking countries, known for their direct approach, find coaching programs are most effective when they complete a thorough analysis of the employee's situation. The first session is used to gather information for the development of future interventions. These countries approach coaching as a supportive function leading to an ultimate goal. However, the fluidity of coaching means conversations can shift over the course of the program in response to issues that arise as the coachee's self-awareness grows. There are no hard and fast rules as to what is addressed in a coaching program, so it is incumbent on the coach to keep each conversation representing a step towards reaching goals. Coaching is future-oriented and keeps conversations in a business context, even when touching on personal issues, behaviors or traits that cross the work-life divide.

Walking Away With Something

People entering coaching conversations expect to walk away with something. Coaches must ensure the greatest likelihood of that happening. The interesting thing about expectations is the fact they drive attitudes and a willingness to learn. Coaching conversations have to be relevant to the person being coached, whether it is an employee developing leadership capabilities or an entrepreneur who wants to increase business efficiency by better understanding a personal leadership style.

The conversation needs objectivity, relevancy, and should deliver a clear understanding of how the coachee can take what is learned into the workplace. Effective coaching means the person coached has found something useful in the session. Experienced coaches prevent conversations from devolving into personal therapy or complaint sessions.

Here are some guidelines for brief coaching sessions. First, the coach must not let the staff person inject too many issues into a single session. An experienced coach determines the relevant issues based on conversations with the coachee because people get hemmed in by personal issues. One of the purposes of coaching is to unbind people from their personal perspectives and traits that are limiting performance. For some people, a single session is enough to unleash their potential.

Coaches do not need to know all the details about the reasons an employee or entrepreneur can benefit from coaching, and that harkens once again back to focus. Coaches need to understand the person's characteristics and way of thinking that is standing in the way of development and problem solving. The conversation is then steered in that direction so a person being coached increases self-awareness and takes a broader perspective.

If this sounds a bit vague, it reflects the nuances of the coaching role. Effective coaching can adapt to circumstances because it zeroes in on the real issues and needs and avoids becoming chat sessions. Coaching conversations are not griping or therapy sessions. It is up to the coach to ensure sessions do not devolve into that format. In the time allotted, the coach should focus on the ultimate goal,



guide the conversation to promote progress, and help the coachee understand what needs further attention and thought.