

From Bosses to Coaches: How do you get your supervisors to take on the new role? by Larry Johnson

The team approach is a powerful way to improve processes, eliminate waste, motivate employees, and please residents. Central to the process is the notion that supervisors must transition from being bosses, who make all the decisions, to coaches, who develop team members to make and carry out good decisions..

One of my clients who is trying this approach asked me for some advice. He asked, "How do you get the supervisors to make the transition? They seem to be resisting."

Of course, this is no big surprise. Changing the way you manage and lead people requires a major shift in both your thinking and your behavioral habits. Instead of telling people what to do, you've got to help people decide what to do. If your style is to tell rather than ask, it can be tough.

Think about the last time you tried to change one of your own habits. You say you're going to go on that diet on Monday, but Monday never comes. Now try to get someone else to go on the same diet, especially someone who thinks dieting is stupid. This is not easy.

Here are the suggestions I offered my client:

I. Change the values

A manager I know observed that one of her supervisors was overworked and stressed out. Production in the supervisor's department was down and morale seemed to be suffering. After some observation, the manager noticed that the supervisor in question was not delegating enough. To remedy the problem, she sent the supervisor to a seminar on delegation.

Upon returning, the manager asked the supervisor how the seminar went.

"Great," he replied. "We learned lots of good delegation techniques."

Later, the manager noticed that the supervisor was still failing to delegate. When she asked him to explain, he replied, "Well, all that delegation stuff is fine, but the bottom line is, if you want something done right, do it yourself."

It was obvious to the manager that although the supervisor may have learned the skills of delegation, he had not adopted the values that these skills require for implementation.

Of course, the question for you is: How do you get your supervisors to both acquire good coaching skills and to adopt the values that will support them in actually implementing good coaching practices? Here are some thoughts:

A. Start with your managers (department heads and the like)

People will value something when they see others whom they respect practicing the desired value. For example, I have a friend who is a very successful investor. I value his advice because I've seen the results he gets. My experiences with his recommendations have confirmed my impression of his good financial judgement.

Likewise, I am more likely to be a good coach if my manager coaches me well. Therefore, I would ask you:

Are the supervisors' managers modeling good coaching skills?

If not, have these managers received the training they need to acquire good coaching skills?

Also, are these managers receiving lots of encouragement, direction, and insistence that they use the skills from their boss so they will adopt the values of coaching?

B. Provide opportunities for success

People will value something when they experience the benefits of the value themselves. For example, I have realized some profits from the investments my friend has recommended. With each gain, I value his judgement more and more.

Likewise, your supervisors will value coaching rather than bossing when they actually try some coaching techniques and get positive results.

To facilitate this:

1. Put the supervisors and their managers through intensive coaching skills training. (When I conduct this training for my clients, I insist that they go through together so they can share common experiences.) This training will help them acquire the skills to coach although it won't necessarily change their values regarding the practice.

The training should include an examination of various coaching styles so that the participants understand that every coaching situation is different.

For example, depending on the maturity and skills of the coachees, one situation may call for a directive style. (“Here, try this.”) Another situation may call for a persuading style, (“Have you considered this?”) In still another situation, a facilitator style might be required, (“What do you think is the best approach?”) Finally, the best style might be a coordinator style. (“Let me know if you have any questions or problems.” In other words, leave them alone unless they ask for help.)

2. Assign facilitator/coaches (managers who have good coaching skills) to sit in on team meetings with supervisors. Their job is to observe, so their participation should be minimal. Afterward, their task is to conduct post mortems on the meetings to identify what the supervisor did well and the skills needing improvement. Suggestions for improvement will be a part of this process, but the emphasis should be on what she did well. The idea is to catch her doing something right, and then reward her so she repeats it.

If none of your managers has good coaching skills, a professional facilitator (someone designated and trained to do this direct coaching of the supervisors) can stand in place of the managers. This approach, however, is less preferable to having the managers themselves do it because it doesn't have the power of leadership that the managers contribute by their very presence. The act of busy managers spending their valuable time coaching their supervisors sends a message that this stuff is important. Remember, you're trying to adjust values here as well as build skills.

3. Identify teams that have effective supervisor/coaches. Partner resistant supervisors with these positive role models so they can see what effective coaching looks like.

4. Constantly encourage resistant supervisors to try the skills. It's like getting a hesitant child to dive off a diving board. He requires the right blend of demonstration (the how); encouragement (the why); graduated experience (the knowledge that if it doesn't hurt to dive at a lower level, maybe it won't hurt to dive at this higher level); and sometimes a gentle push (do it or else).

Hopefully, this gets the ball rolling. Like the child who finally makes a successful dive, (“Hey, that was fun,”) any successes the supervisor experiences from the coaching will serve as reward for continuing the practice.

5. Set up resistors for success. Arrange the team configurations so the resistant supervisors can actually experience the success that comes with using

good coaching techniques. Put them with high functioning teams that perform fairly independently. One word of caution: the manager/facilitator should watch this team closely to avoid the supervisor's demotivating the members.

II. Reward coaching skills

Behavioral science tells us that what gets rewarded is what gets repeated. Practically speaking, you get what you pay for.

I would suggest, if you haven't done so already, that you examine your reward system. Are demonstrations of effective coaching skills a part of every manager and supervisor performance evaluation? If a supervisor demonstrates the skills, will it be reflected in his review and in his paycheck? If he doesn't, are there consequences?

III. Lead the charge

Organizations tend to reflect the obsessions of their leaders, and a leader's real obsessions are reflected in his or her obsessive behavior.

If you are not already doing so, demonstrate lots of obsessive behavior by making the coaching issue a central focus of meetings, published standards, your mission statement, and your discussions in the hallways with your people. In other words, become something of a coaching nut.

In this way, people start to get the message that what's important to the administrator is not only that we pass our survey's, keep the beds filled and make a profit, but that we do these things through the empowerment and development of our people - and that takes coaching.

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