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Coaching: The Language of Leadership

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One of the most important things that we can do to inch closer to achieving our goals is to reflect – reflective practice involves taking time to think about what our goals are, what we need to do to achieve those goals and what lessons we have learned on our journey towards achieving our goals.

Imagine if you could get the opportunity to sit with someone from time to time to go through a process that helps you reflect in this way about where you are coming from, where you are currently, and where you are heading. The clarity, focus and drive that you get from such reflections is at the heart of coaching.

Coaching is a non-prescriptive conversation that helps people clarify their goals, explore various options for achieving these goals and commit to an action plan based on the options they select. We like to think about coaching as the “language of leadership” – it is the way that effective leaders think and act.

We say this because the most powerful thing that a leader can do is to help others achieve their potential. Each day in all our interactions, we will be most effective as leaders if we can help the people around us discover their purpose and work towards achieving that purpose. This is the overarching purpose of leadership – not just to get people to achieve immediate results and targets, but to get them aligned with the bigger picture and get them productively engaged in working towards that bigger picture.

Effective leaders use the non-prescriptive and non-judgmental approach of coaching to engaging with their colleagues and supporting them to achieve their potential.

Coaching vs Other Performance Improvement Tools

Coaching focuses on the achievement of goals in a non-prescriptive manner and is therefore quite different from other forms of intervention. For example, counselling focuses on problems and pain. Consulting is much more prescriptive, while mentoring is also prescriptive and focuses on a specific skill or achieving a specific position. Unlike mentoring, your coach does not necessarily need to have the specific experience or attained the specific position that you are trying to attain.

Sometimes, when we facilitate learning in a workshop, we use coaching techniques and approaches that challenge participants to “think for a change”. So, consultants, mentors and other interventionists also borrow some practices from the world of coaching.



Sometimes, while interacting with their colleagues, coaching leaders may need to be prescriptive, especially where they sense that the person may be making a decision that has dangerous consequences or when the coach believes that his or her specific experience may prevent the other person from making unnecessary and costly errors.

Core Coaching Behaviours & Skills

Coaching is driven by several important behaviours that ensure that you get the results that you want. The first and perhaps most important is **LISTENING**. Coaching is about listening actively to the other person – sensing their verbal and non-verbal cues and allowing them to express all their thoughts and feelings so that you can support them.

To listen effectively also requires you to apply the skills of **QUESTIONING**. Effective coaches know how to ask powerful questions. They use open-ended questions to get the client to express themselves and then use closed-ended questions to check for understanding and transition to other discussion points.

Another very important coaching skill is **RAPPORT BUILDING** – you must be able create a strong bond and connection with the client if they are to trust you and confide in you. This is often achieved by being upfront and honest about your own realities and challenges. The more willing you are to be vulnerable, the more open the coaching conversation will be.

Great coaches should also be good at **GIVING FEEDBACK** especially when you are checking in on the progress that the client is making. Feedback should be balanced, objective and specific. It should challenge and inspire the client at the same time.

Because coaching should be non-prescriptive, effective coaches use a lot of **STORYTELLING** and anecdotes to get their clients to connect with some of the ideas they would like to convey.

Finally, but not exhaustively, good coaches should be **FOCUSED** and **DISCIPLINED**. An important part of coaching success is your ability to get your client to be committed to specific actions in a disciplined manner. You must therefore be exemplary in discipline and focus and know how to use tools that enhance discipline and focus.

Coaching in Action – CLEAR

There are many models for coaching that different coaches use, but most of them really focus on the same things – getting to know the client, clarifying goals and expectations, and then exploring alternatives and committing to action plans.

Coaching in Action – CLEAR



One model that we have used very successfully in teaching and providing coaching to clients is called the CLEAR Model. CLEAR is a mnemonic that stands for Connect/Contract/Clarify; Listen; Explore, Action and Reflect/Review. Let's explain what each of these elements mean.

At the beginning of the coaching conversation, you need to Contract with the client, set expectations of the relationship and of each other. You must also create a connection by getting to know each other and using those rapport building skills that we mentioned earlier. At the beginning it is also important to clarify what the purpose of the coaching is and the specific goals that the client would like to achieve.

Listening involves you asking questions to get the client to talk. These will include open and close ended questions and using enhanced listening techniques to facilitate open sharing from the client.

Then, you will work with the client to explore different ideas and alternatives. One of my favourite techniques is to try to get the client to recognize that they have been in a similar situation before and to tap into the pattern of success from those similar past situations to come up with ideas themselves. This is the heart of coaching – using questions to get the client to figure out the answers themselves rather than you prescribing them yourself.

After you have taken time to explore the alternatives and their respective pros and cons, the conversations should focus on a specific number of actions that the client will need to commit to. Each action should have a specific timeframe and a clear description of what success looks like, i.e., what is the exact outcome that you expect from each action.

Finally, you must spend time reflecting on the session, identifying lessons learned and areas for improvement and proceeding to review the actions and outcomes with the client in between your sessions or at your next session as agreed by both of you.

Implementing a Coaching Program

In the 1980s, we had bosses, then the language changed to supervisors and managers in 1990s and 2000s. Now, the language is evolving again, and some organizations are adopting the word “Coach” as the reference to the senior colleague to whom you report.

Organizations see the power in the practice of coaching and want to incorporate it fully into their organizational DNA. Unfortunately, just calling someone “Coach” does not mean the person is effective at coaching.

Organizations like yours therefore need to invest in developing and implementing formal coaching programs and very importantly, providing coaching to its leaders. One of the most effective ways of creating a culture of coaching, is to provide coaching for your senior leaders who will in turn appreciate the immense value of coaching and be well equipped to act as coaches to those who report to them.

Formal coaching programs will cover issues of assigning coaches, training for coaches and clients, tools for coaching, reporting requirements and metrics to gauge the effectiveness and impact of the program.

You will no doubt agree that coaching is one of the most powerful tools that a leader can use to achieve results for the team and organization. If everyone around you can “think for a change”, reflect and continuously commit to self-improving behaviours, then it will be much easier to achieve the results that you want for your team and organization.

Coaching conversations can be very therapeutic for both the coach and the client. When you coach others, you are constantly bringing out your mirror, learning from other people’s realities and challenging yourself to be better.

On a personal level, I have benefitted immeasurably from being on both sides – as a coach and as a client, and I am always excited to take up new coaching clients and get time out to have a conversation with a coach myself.

If you would like to unleash the power of coaching in your organization either through a formal coaching program, or to enhance the skills of your managers who are already on a program, then please contact our team at Learning Impact NG on +234 805 195 3276 who are available to support you in achieving these and other important people development goals that you have.