

The Coaching Manager Model—An Overview

In this chapter, we will

- Provide an overview of the Coaching Manager Model of developmental coaching in practice through an in-depth case example
- Introduce the key components of the model, which are the coaching culture, the coaching manager mindset, the “coachee,” the learning opportunity, reflection and dialogue, feedback, and finally, the action plan

In Chapter 1, we gave you our definition of developmental coaching, but the textbook rarely does justice to a significant human interaction. Let’s start then with an actual story, a case study. The identity, industry, and company of the characters in the case have been disguised, but the situation is quite real. In addition to illustrating the coaching process, we’re going to use the case to illustrate some of the challenges coaching managers and those who work with them are likely to face in the organizational world today. Coaching has always been a highly desired and rarely practiced managerial competency. As stated in Chapter 1, the chief “excuse” we hear with regard

to why managers don't coach has to do with time. We would propose however that while time is certainly a critical resource for most managers, it is likely not the culprit here. Why do we say this? As you look at the following case, consider the role that time plays. Why can't these people find the time to "coach"?

Tonia and Ashok

Tonia is an engineer in the product development group of a mid-sized technology firm. She's had a successful career to date, based largely on the strength of her ideas and ability to come up with solutions to the most difficult of problems. Only 8 years out of her undergraduate engineering degree, she's also known for being very creative. Ashok, her new manager, took over leadership of the group several months ago, after a successful period managing the company's research group. He has been encouraged to "help her move to the next level" by his own manager, the division vice president. The company has a fairly good track record of identifying talented employees and fostering their development, though as with most such efforts, there is considerable variation from manager to manager.

Ashok had been lucky. He came to the company 2 years ago after several very successful periods at other technology-oriented firms, working as an engineer. He wanted to be a manager though. When he joined the company, his manager was one of those who had been interested in the development of his direct reports. His help was critical to Ashok's development as a leader. Ashok felt grateful for that help and worked to adopt aspects of his former boss's style when he could. Ashok was fascinated by the idea of talent. He tried to always keep his eyes open for those who he felt were exceptional within the company and beyond. In the back of his mind, he was very aware that as a manager you are absolutely dependent on the talent of your people. You never know when you may need someone to help you out.

When Ashok took over the group, he made a point of sitting down with each of the engineers on his team and get to know them. This was not an easy task to accomplish as the group was spread over three offices in three different parts of the country. He made sure those first sessions were in person, however. He was uncomfortable dealing with important relationship building work solely over the telephone or even by videoconferencing.

He listened to their ideas, concerns, and aspirations for the group and was overall pleased with what he heard, though the group did face some serious challenges. The technology that was a center piece of the company's strategy was rapidly becoming vulnerable to disruption. New technologies

coming out of competitors were able to solve customer problems more quickly and as such, threatened the company's long-term prospects. The product engineers in particular were going to have to engage in a radical overhaul of their proprietary technology if they were to remain competitive. They had a number of great ideas for doing so, too many in fact. The 10 engineers in the group had 10 very different points of view regarding how to proceed.

Tonia's ideas had gotten some serious attention from senior management, more so than her peers'. Ashok agreed that the direction she offered was worthy of immediate attention and resources. Within the group, some of the engineers were likely to feel quite disappointed at the prioritization that would have to take place. Ashok couldn't lose them, they were all valuable to the group and the company. Most could easily get jobs elsewhere. Tonia, with his help, would have to win enough support from her colleagues to move ahead and keep the group intact.

Ashok saw Tonia has someone with fairly good though not great interpersonal and leadership skills. She was certainly pleasant, but she could also push others very hard. He wished that she had had a bit more previous experience as a leader before taking on a leadership role in this project, but felt she could grow into the job with some support, which was after all her idea. He sometimes wondered whether or not her being the only woman in the group was a challenge for her. He found a way to ask her about this in one of their initial meetings, but her response was somewhat vague. As she said, "the guys are fine, no problem." After getting to know the group a bit, Ashok was reassured that everyone was behaving professionally, but he was also aware that social identity differences can influence comfort levels, the sharing of ideas, and sometimes even trust. Tonia's interpersonal skills were likely to be challenged regardless.

Ashok let Tonia know that senior management felt that her vision offered important potential for the company and that resources should be devoted to creating a plan, prototyping, and testing. She was being asked to take on the project lead role. They could not at this point predict with certainty that the direction she was proposing was the right direction; they would simply have to test it and see. He also made it clear to her that he and the company needed her to help the rest of the product engineering team get on board with prioritizing this direction that was likely to be controversial. She would have to rebuild the team around her vision, in spite of some likely bruised egos and disappointment.

The two began to work out a plan. Tonia was clearly aware that this was going to be a challenge on multiple levels and was open about her concerns. She found Ashok to be a good listener, and though they didn't know each

other well yet, she had the sense that he was trustworthy. Perhaps it was the ability to directly give critical feedback when appropriate; perhaps it was the fact that he always seemed to follow through on his commitments; perhaps it was the fact that he asked for feedback as he began to take on the leadership role and actually listened to that feedback. He didn't retaliate or become defensive; he tried to address the issues.

However, Tonia knew that she was a very prideful person. She had a difficult time admitting she needed help, even to herself. Her previous manager was a very nice person, easy to get along with most of the time. However, he was quite controlling and risk averse. She learned that she better not show up in his office with a problem. That was fine with her because she prided herself on figuring things out on her own. However, she had never had quite the level of responsibility she sought. She wanted to have a broader impact, and perhaps to become an engineering manager at some point. She was savvy enough to know that she was going to need his support regardless, so she was determined to make things work with Ashok.

Ashok was clear with her about the two outcomes he was hoping for: get the prototypes done on time and keep the group together. The deadline was not negotiable and "Lose no one." Of course, you can't force people to commit to a plan; you have to invite them. They asked themselves whether or not the work that would be needed would be of interest to other members of the team, and they felt it likely would be. If they were successful, and got the project done on time, they all stood to gain, not just Tonia.

Ashok was bringing in everyone on the team for a face-to-face set of meetings in the next week. He would announce the new direction and discuss it with the team. He wanted to be clear that he's inviting everyone to participate and that their participation was critically important, but that Tonia will be the team project leader. Tonia would then meet with each individual on the team in person over the next several weeks to discuss the project in depth and discuss the kinds of contributions each could make and to seek out their ideas and recommendations.

Tonia knew some of those meetings could be difficult. Ashok also thought she was going to be facing some tough meetings and suggested Tonia and he discuss the concerns they might have about each individual prior to those meetings. Ideally, this would help Tonia think through the best approach for each individual involved. This would take additional time, but Tonia was very likely to fail if she didn't get some extra support. She had the potential to lead, but she wasn't a veteran leader quite yet. If she got off to a bad start in managing these relationships, it could slow the project down considerably. Tonia was relieved at the offer though she was not aware of just how much she had to learn at this point.

The initial team meeting went relatively well. There was some disappointment expressed by some members of the team, but most took the position: “We need to know more and we would like to provide some input once we learn more.” They also naturally wondered what this would mean for each of them. Some were circumspect and didn’t reveal their reactions to Tonia’s project leadership role. The idea of the individual meetings appealed to most of them, particularly since Tonia offered to travel to each of their locations and meet with each of the engineers face to face.

The first individual meeting, with George, went very well, as she and Ashok had expected. She knew George to be open minded and they had worked well together previously. Tonia ended up feeling as though she got more than she gave in terms of learning as George had already done some homework and had a wealth of ideas. She began to really see how the contributions of the others would be essential. She also began to feel a bit more humble about her capabilities. However, she had some dread about the next planned meeting, with Sam. She was relieved that she’d be talking this one over with Ashok via telephone tonight.

She and Sam had had something of a stormy relationship in the past. She admired his engineering skill and considered him to be extremely smart. However, he was also very opinionated and they had had a few clashes. Sam was very attached to an alternative plan, probably the only other one to get serious attention from top management. He also was someone who might have felt very competitive with whoever took charge of the project if it wasn’t himself. He was silent in the initial all team meeting. Ashok began their evening call as he usually does, with a question:

“So, your next one is with Sam, right? I’m not sure where he stands. We have to have him on board. What’s your plan?”

“I’m still thinking this through,” Tonia replied. I don’t know any other way to put it to him. This is the direction we’re going, and we hope he’ll get on board.”

“How do you think he’ll react? Any idea?” Ashok wondered.

“I don’t know. If I were him, I’d probably be pretty disappointed, even angry.”

Ashok queried, “Ever been in a similar situation, faced what he’s facing now?”

“Oh sure, this was before your time, but I lost a big debate over a major change in the software a few years back. I was sure I had the best possible approach. I was annoyed, and I still think the company made a bad decision.”

“So I heard,” replied Ashok. Did you eventually come around to the direction chosen?”

“Yes, I did. I thought I’d learn a lot about the technology that was chosen, and though I still think that was the wrong decision, I did find working on the program to be personally valuable,” remembered Tonia.

“Yeah, with engineers and scientists, the learning perspective is very important. Is there any way that just participating in this project could help Sam’s career?” Ashok wondered.

“That’s an interesting question,” thought Tonia. “Let me give that some thought,” Tonia continued, “I need to consider that more with everyone, not just Sam. I guess the vision behind this plan isn’t likely to generate a cheerleading squad by itself.”

“Probably not,” Ashok said with a smile.

Tonia then began to formalize her plan for the meeting, such as it was. “I’m going to have to just ask them about that, find out what connections they see, for themselves personally. I can’t know that for sure unless I ask. It’s too important to guess.”

Ashok agreed, “Yes, way too important.” Tonia then talked over a few ways to approach the meeting, but they both agreed that there was no one right way, she’ll just have to try and see what happens, listen and watch for cues. “Call me tomorrow, let me know how it went. I can call Sam if necessary, but somehow I think that would not be all that useful. It means more if it is between the two of you.” Tonia agreed.

The meeting with Sam was indeed challenging. Sam was professional, but he made it clear that he was indeed very disappointed, if not angry. He talked about that disappointment at length. Tonia was surprised by his intensity, and taken aback. She wasn’t sure what to do so she just listened. They didn’t reach closure on a next step. That night, Tonia called Ashok.

“Well, it did not go all that well.” Tonia then explained what happened. She somewhat expected Ashok to criticize her for not making more progress. He did not.

“You sound disappointed,” Ashok replied. “What were you hoping for?”

Tonia explained that she hoped they could have talked more about how Sam could contribute to the new plan rather than just venting about what happened. She feared that she appeared weak. She was surprised at her own reaction. Unfortunately, she was scheduled to leave for home first thing in the morning.

Ashok suggested that “perhaps listening is what you needed to do. What makes you think you appeared weak?”

Tonia responded, “Because I didn’t get to make my case, he hasn’t really tried to understand what we’re proposing here and I just spent all my time listening. I wasn’t assertive. I guess I just wasn’t ready for how angry he was.”

“Perhaps not, but sometimes you get lucky. Maybe listening helped. You’re right though. Hopefully listening settled him down, but there is more work to do I suspect. Maybe you’re not finished just yet.”

“No, not at all,” replied Tonia. “I’m going to have to change my plans and give it another try tomorrow. That will give us both a chance to sleep on it.” Ashok agreed. Tonia then sent an e-mail to Sam, appreciating his candor today and stating that she’d like to continue to the discussion tomorrow. She thought she could change her travel plans. Sam quickly replied that he could make time in his schedule. Tonia e-mailed her team’s administrator to ask for help in changing her flight.

Our Reactions to the Case

We’ve talked with many highly effective “coaching managers” such as Ashok. Our most basic reactions are usually similar. “Wouldn’t it be great to work for someone like her (or him).” Let’s try to break this down with a bit more specificity, however.

It is quite likely that at least some of you reading that story will be able to identify with either or both of the parties. You may not see this as a

Exercise 2.1 Your Reactions to the Case

Before going any further, stop and consider your own response to this story. Does it strike you as an example of good management, perhaps the kind you have (hopefully) experienced from time to time? Does it strike you as perhaps “too good?” Perhaps it seems unrealistic. Can we really expect managers, ourselves in other words, to react this way? Are we asking too much of such an organization? Is this the kind of place you might dream of working? Is Ashok the kind of manager you would like to have, or to become? At the end of Chapter 1, we asked you to assess your mindset as you explore developmental coaching. What attitudes do you take to the challenge?

As with all management, and perhaps with much of life, you may actually have two challenges before you. It is a given that most of us can get better at something, learning more about something, improve our skill set. We all have a lot to learn. What do we have to unlearn? What bad habits, norms, traditions and beliefs get in the way of our ability to improve? That’s another way of asking you to consider the question of your own reaction to the case.

coaching story. It reads more like a typical business or maybe a change management case. This is a classic coaching situation and set of coaching conversations in our view, however. But, it is indeed very much a business case as well. Why do we say that? We asked you earlier to consider the role that time plays in this case. Are you surprised under the circumstances that Ashok and Tonia are spending all this time (probably about ten minutes a night in reality) discussing how to make this new direction for the team work? You shouldn't be. This team is very important to the survival of the company. Does that make it worth the time? We would answer that question with a resounding, "YES!" Tonia's not done this type of work before, and she could really fail to deliver on either or both of the company's goals for the project. They're spending time on it because they essentially have no choice, though there is another really good reason for taking this time. Note, however, that you may have known some managers (perhaps yourself included) who did not take the time, and just threw someone into a highly demanding role for which they were not fully prepared. This is known as the "sink-or-swim" theory of leadership development. Sometimes good people do swim, but sometimes they sink. When it's important, we like to improve the odds of swimming, that is, success, if possible.

Here's the other reason for taking the time. Is Tonia learning anything important, gaining knowledge that is likely to stick with her and help her become a better business leader as well as being a really good engineer? Again, we would respond with a resounding "YES!" This young engineer could well evolve into a very sophisticated engineering manager or general manager. Imagine the value that she would have for the company if that could happen over the long term. In addition, however, will this investment of time likely result in a greater sense of satisfaction with her job on her part? We would suggest yes, which would increase the likelihood that such valuable talent will stay with the company rather than move to another firm that might pay more attention to her development. Consider the alternative as well. What if, having earned this big break, she fails miserably because she gets into a situation with one or more team members that undermines the project time table and results in one or more of the engineers leaving. Where does that leave her, Ashok, and the company?

In our discussions with managers who coach, we have found that coaching and talent development are intimately linked with day-to-day business challenges. The coaching in a sense blends into the overall workings of a team or unit. Frequently, though there are exceptions, coaching does not stand apart as an activity that takes place on special occasions or at a specific designated time. How does that work? We'll try to answer that question by describing the Coaching Manager Model of developmental coaching.

The Coaching Manager Model

As we begin to more formally describe the Coaching Manager Model, we have found it useful to consider the distinction between the factors that *enable* a successful coaching experience for all parties, from the actual act of coaching itself. You might think of the enabling factors as the ship on which the journey takes place. A well-built ship can handle a lot of problems, a poorly built one maybe less so.

You'll note that our description of the background of the case, the ship to continue the analogy, actually required far more "words" than the coaching conversations themselves. Coaching seems to flow naturally in this context, between these people even though in this case it was planned. That was no accident. That context was shaped by Ashok and perhaps even more by many implicit and explicit decisions made by senior managers and others that created a generally positive attitude toward talent development. Though we have known many managers who are highly effective coaches in highly dysfunctional contexts, the context can help a great deal, and we see it here. We'll have much more to say about that later in this chapter, and in much greater detail in subsequent chapters.

You'll also note that while the coaching activity seems quite natural, it does not necessarily take place under ideal conditions. The actual coaching conversations took place by phone for the most part because the parties are in different cities at this point in time. The manager and "coachee" (a term will use often in the book) aren't particularly close; they are still building their relationship. However, they have a developing solid working relationship and put at least some time into making that happen. Ashok in fact spends time building relationships with his direct reports, knowing that the relationship is of critical importance in dealing with the many day-to-day challenges that people face when trying to work collaboratively.

You'll also notice that, in contrast to the impressions some people have of coaching in the work place, no psychoanalysis is taking place here. No one is even talking about learning and career development. What are they talking about? They are talking about very specific business challenges, and how to achieve some fairly clear goals. They are talking about problem solving, only in this case, the problems are both technological and human. We would submit that the process of problem solving, among other business processes, can inherently be leveraged for learning purposes and that it is natural to do so, if done with learning in mind. It depends on how one goes about working on those problems.

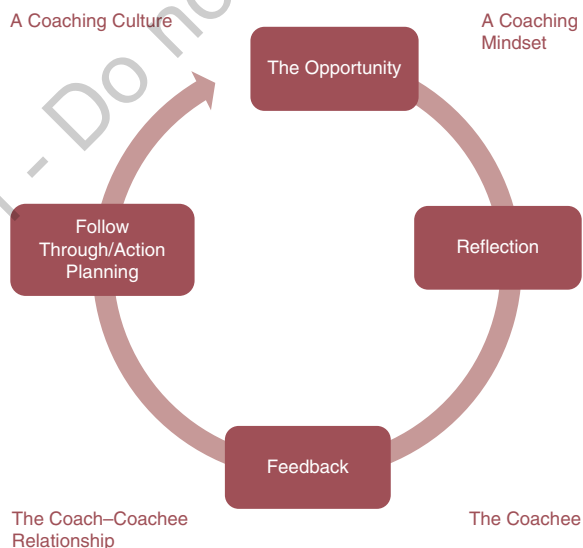
Take another look at the short conversations presented here. The tone is actually fairly supportive though there is a sense of urgency. Ashok asks

questions, listens, and in doing so encourages Tonia to think through what she is up against and what options might be possible for dealing with those challenges. After all, Tonia's the person who has to get the work done. Her perspective is actually the one that counts the most here. Her eyes and ears are "on the ground."

There is also a little bit of feedback and guidance thrown in, but not that much. Ashok is helping Tonia think and come up with some reasonable solutions on her own. Again, she's the one who will have to put these solutions into action. Ashok is quite aware that Tonia has never taken on a role like this before. He's not expecting miracles, but in assessing her capabilities, he did feel she could grow into the job. However, he is expecting that ultimately she'll be successful in this effort and as such is making sure that their coaching conversations stay on track.

These are our reactions to stories that we have heard time and time again. As we stated earlier, the coaching model that we present here is not really our model. It is our effort to distill the "essence" if you will of the common themes that we have heard in the stories told by coaching managers and share them with you. Over the years, and editions of this book, we have continued to test and refine our understanding of those themes. In the remainder of this chapter, we'll provide you with an overview of the factors

Figure 2.1 The Coaching Manager Model



Source: (Author Created).

that make developmental coaching a reality and hopefully offer a language or set of descriptions that will help you make your own observations, of others and perhaps most important, of yourself in action. The overriding themes, or components of the developmental coaching model, are presented in Figure 2.1. Note that while they are presented in an apparently ordered fashion, in reality, the order can be subject to change. What is important is that the learning cycle continues.

A Coaching Culture

We begin our discussion of the Coaching Manager Model by looking at the enabling factors, culture, the coaching manager mindset, the coachee and the coach-coachee relationship. We described this in previous editions as a “coaching-friendly context.” We could also have used a broader phrase such as a “development-oriented culture.” The latter though is really too general. Some groups and entire companies think of themselves as developmentally oriented because they will in fact give talented people a chance to grow by offering them important and tough assignments that have learning potential. However, some of those same companies ultimately don’t help those who they ask to grow, to grow. Rather, they operate more on the lines of sink or swim, as previously discussed. Certainly it can be useful to put talented people into stretch assignments, but that does not ensure that they learn the most important lessons from those assignments. Development really involves looking at the future as well as the current situation.

Tonia and Ashok are the fortunate beneficiaries of an organizational culture that encourages coaching, not just giving people high risk/reward/learning opportunities. We don’t know anything about the company’s history, but we do get a hint that the company values its talent. They gave Ashok a chance when he first arrived with the goal of moving from engineer to engineering manager. Ashok’s boss was indeed a coaching manager. It’s not completely consistent though, and it never is. Tonia’s manager though capable in many ways, had trouble letting go of control and as such, Tonia was held back a bit. Regardless, Tonia was recognized as someone who had greater potential than she was currently utilizing. Ashok was told to help Tonia “move to the next level.” We doubt he was told to “spend time coaching her” as we’ve rarely heard such an instruction set. Rather, Ashok borrowed from his own experience with his previous manager and began to do just that. He had received a signal that clearly stated “coaching is a good use of your time.” He had experienced just how helpful it could be. Note, however that the signal is often an implicit one, rather than being explicit.

Such is the nature of culture. Culture doesn't mandate what will definitely take place in any particular situation. Culture represents a set of patterns that really do represent something important about an organization or society.

The Coaching Mindset

In addition to the generally positive attitude toward talent development Ashok experienced in his first years with the company, he also brought something else to the challenge. He is a student of talent. He appreciates people who can do great things, or learn to do great things. He can see the value of talent for a team or business. When he watched team sports on television, he noticed talent, listened to what the announcers and coaches said about developing talent over time, that it was a process. A player with potential might not be that good right now, but given a chance and given some coaching, she might turn into a super star. You can "coach people up" to do more than even they thought they could do, if conditions are right.

He felt good about helping to build the talent of others, he knew it was a real contribution and was confident of that fact. As such, *he would often reflect on what others could do, not just what they are doing now*. He enjoyed talking with his own managers and vice presidents when they reviewed the talent in the organization each year. He understood that part of his role is to keep thinking about how each individual could contribute, more and better to where the company was going. He was acutely aware that if you could help someone figure out what they wanted to do and could do, they were very likely to be quite motivated when given the opportunity. Such was the case with Tonia.

But note that he did not approach this as a counselor might. He was not out to help an individual, Tonia in this case, because she needed that help, though she did. Indeed, it is not his job to help her in isolation from the rest of their work. It is his job to deliver a product and keep a team together. Talent makes that happen. It is true, Ashok likes to help as do most of the coaching managers we have interviewed over the years. However, that's not their primary motivation. Most have told us that they help because it makes sense for the business and for the morale of the team. It is not a moral cause, though helping others succeed sets a positive moral standard. Not all come to a business or organizational career with an interest in developing people. Some learn along the way that it mattered, to them as people, but very importantly to their business.

There is one more very important aspect of the coaching mindset that we have to point to before moving on, however. Note that a coach does not do for others. The other party has to take charge and be given enough autonomy to try, and as often happens when people are stretching and learning new skills, fail. The coachee is simply not going to get it right every time, whatever “it” is. The coach is taking a risk, and in business, this risk is quite real. Hopefully, you’ll be lucky enough to work in a culture that supports some risk taking in this regard, as Ashok does. It doesn’t matter, however. If you’re coaching, you’re taking a risk. We’ll have much more to say about this in subsequent chapters.

It’s the Relationship That Makes It All Possible

We return to the notion that a relationship for example is a critical managerial tool (we hate to put it like that, but there it is). Our research had indicated all along that the relationship was probably of critical importance to coaching, but as we discussed in Chapter 1, there is substantial large scale research in support of that understanding (Gregory & Levy, 2011). If you want to help someone improve, you need to have a decent and trusting relationship with him or her. We just stated that there are clearly risks involved, for both parties, when an employee is given an important stretch assignment. The two parties are really “in it together” as the saying goes. Let us emphasize that that does not mean that you have to have a close or emotional relationship. In Chapter 1, we discussed the fact that coaching is not the same as mentoring. The mentoring relationship does involve an emotional attachment. There is likely to be some positive feeling between an employee and coaching manager, but our research has demonstrated clearly that useful coaching can take place between parties who are essentially strangers if, and only if, certain factors are present.

What makes it possible to quickly establish the basis for a coaching relationship? We’ll have much more to say about this in subsequent chapters, but perhaps most importantly, the coach needs to be able to communicate to the coachee in a nonjudgmental fashion. A coaching manager has a bit of a challenge accomplishing this because they ultimately in most companies will be doing a performance appraisal. They will be judging the employee. Doesn’t that create an inherent conflict then? As we said earlier, every coaching manager we have interviewed has acknowledged that yes, you have to do both, but don’t see this as a significant problem.

How can you do both? By being honest about the fact that you do both but also not using what you learn in coaching to undermine an employee’s

performance rating. If you ask someone to do something that he or she is not yet proficient in doing, and they make some mistakes in the early part of the learning process, and you use those mistakes to lower their performance rating, then you are in essence playing “gotcha.” The coachee’s candor in directly talking about their mistakes and problem areas is used against them. Trust, and the relationship, are undermined.

If on the other hand, you have honestly tried to help someone improve, and given them feedback during the learning process, then as nearly every coach has told us, “the performance appraisal is really just a restatement of where things stand. There are no surprises.” If you have given someone a chance to learn a job and made an effort to help them grow into the job, and they just can’t, perhaps it’s the wrong job. This is one of those risks. Candor along the way however, particularly if delivered in an honest attempt to be helpful, usually results in the building of a relationship that can withstand tough discussions about what to do next if a change of direction is warranted. Note though that this is a two-way process. We’ll say more about that shortly.

There are other elements on the coach’s side we’ll be exploring, as well. The coaching manager has to be sufficiently available to actually coach. The coach must be a good listener. He or she must be good at helping the coachee reflect through the use of questions. The skill of asking good questions, in the right way, is actually a tough one to develop. At the same time, the coaching manager has to be effective at providing useful feedback and when warranted, helping the employee develop an action plan. This doesn’t mean that the coaching manager has to be an expert in everything the coachee is trying to accomplish, but when the coach does have expertise, its careful application can be warranted.

Like many others, we have noted over the years that good managers, whether coaching managers or not, know of the importance of building a good relationship with their employees but also with others in and outside of the organization. The relationship is the highway over which makes business activity of any sort possible. It takes time and attention to make sure the highway is in good repair. We often despair of managers who earlier in their career think that going to the cafeteria for lunch is a waste of valuable time, that they are better off eating at their desks. We strongly encourage anyone in a management role to consider that chatting with people is indeed a part of their job, a very important part.

In essence, the work of being a coaching manager implies that you also have to be a better leader. You may have to vary your leadership style, approach different people in different ways, to make the relationship work. You may have to hold your temper when things go wrong because if you don’t, you’ll undermine the relationship. All of this means that the coaching

manager is continually growing, just as the coachee. That's one of the many reasons that coaching is good for a manager, it challenges them to keep learning as a leader, not just a doer.

The Coachee

That relationship, however, is co-created. You'll note that Tonia had to size up whether or not she was going to be candid with Ashok and then she had to manage her own desire to appear to be fully competent, to know as much about management as she knew about leadership. She had to admit to herself that she did not, and that that was OK. As we saw, that wasn't easy for her. After all, she's spent years as a highly effective engineer making valuable contributions to the company.

Tonia was able to manage her own self-esteem in this situation. She could understand that to advance as she hoped, she had to accept that she was quite deficient in a number of important skill areas. That's not easy for mature adults. In the brief coaching interchanges we see in the case, her pride has not perhaps really been tested, yet. She did run into a very real problem with Sam and felt quite overwhelmed. However, she dutifully reported the situation to Ashok, who didn't focus on the fact that she didn't say much to Sam in return, but rather encouraged her to consider alternatives and next steps. Let's say the next step was a bad one, and Sam threatened to leave the company. Perhaps this occurred because Tonia got tired of Sam's complaints and returned his anger with her own. Ashok might have found it necessary to jump into the situation or provide more critical feedback to Tonia. The learning process can be arduous and Tonia has to be willing to accept that. She is in fact coachable, a very important skill that is not universal. That being said, as a successful and prideful adult, she also has to struggle at times with the idea that she needs to figure everything out for herself. Learning is a humbling activity. You often find out just how incompetent you are when you're in the learning process. A good coachee has to be able to put up with that tension.

More to the point, she has to want it, she has to want to learn and face those challenges. She's willing to do so in this situation because the opportunity Ashok provided for her was aligned with her own aspirations. She was clear with Ashok about what she wanted. Perhaps even more foundational than that, she knew what she wanted. Not every employee does. That does make it more difficult for the coaching manager.

Developmental coaching then does not involve throwing individuals naively into difficult situations that may or may not be of interest to them,

or that may or may not be reasonable from a learning perspective. Ashok and Tonia spent time looking at this opportunity. Both thought through, together, questions of motivation and capability. Was this a logical next step in light of both of those factors? They decided that it was, even though it was going to stretch Tonia's interpersonal and leadership skills.

Note that this kind of collaboration can serve to strengthen the relationship and help both parties manage risk. Yes, there are some risks, but they are not overwhelming. Tonia does have a foundational skills set on which to build, she has support, she has resources and she has agreed to be open with Ashok about the problems she may face. This then helps Ashok sleep at night! He knows what is going on, and hopefully is better positioned to spot a major problem before it occurs or in close enough proximity to help put out a subsequent fire. Now let's turn to the actual coaching conversation itself.

The Opportunity

There is no coaching without an opportunity. It is the opportunity, more specifically the challenging assignment, that drives the learning. This is likely to be true regardless of discipline. As we discussed in Chapter 1, most adults, perhaps most children as well, learn best from experience. We also know nearly 80% of leaders, looking back on their most important learning experiences, point to stretch assignments as playing a critical role in their development (Lombardo & Eichinger, 2001). Both the coaching manager and, when appropriate, classroom training can help, but the opportunity is key. The experience of working on that opportunity drives the learning. Coaching itself, while often pleasurable, facilitates the learning. It doesn't drive it.

When we've asked participants in our seminars about what their best coaching manager did to help, one of the most common answers is, "gave me a chance on a very important assignment for which I was only partially prepared." They go on to talk about the importance of having someone believe in you enough to give you a chance, if even if you don't quite believe in yourself. Perhaps the most important task of the coaching manager is to provide, when possible, such stretch assignments.

In this case, the opportunity is fairly clear. This is an important project for all parties involved. The team has to take a significantly different approach to their product development activities for competitive reasons. Tonia's plan seems likely to be an important part of their response. She has a reasonable though undeveloped skill set for leading the effort. This is an

opportunity for her to help the company adapt to changing circumstances. It is also an opportunity for her to learn to lead. After some planning, she jumps in and begins to take action. The action allows for facilitation of learning through the coaching conversation.

Reflection

As we discussed in Chapter 1, entrepreneurial ventures are rarely launched after years of careful planning and research, though on occasion, that can happen (Sarasvathy, 2008). Most ventures, those that will ultimately succeed, begin with an idea that rather quickly leads to some sort of action. These can be thought of as experiments. Hopefully, risk is effectively managed during this experimental phase, that the potential loss if failure is experienced is “affordable” (Brown, Keifer, & Schlesinger, 2014). Once the action is taken, and the outcome of that action is experienced, then one can learn from the experience, if one takes the time to reflect on what happened. This is the idea behind the After Action Reviews conducted in various armed forces in the United States and other countries, consulting firms and other businesses that find they are frequently called upon to deal with the unexpected under conditions of some risk (Garvin, 2000). It is essential that they can learn valuable lessons from such experiences because the unexpected may well recur, or may offer lessons applicable in other situations. The outcome of this process of reflection may well be a minor, or major modification of one’s plan for the next iteration of activity.

Tonia’s immediate task is to build support among the team members for her plan. Ashok has carefully established the goal for this activity. But each team member represents a distinct challenge, some more challenging than others in fact. Each has a different set of interests. Tonia will need to try to influence each team member. If things go well in a particular encounter, she may draw from lessons from it other than, “that’s what worked with him.” If the situation is more challenging, she may need to approach the individual several times, listening at one point, but not spending all her time listening, trying to ultimately make her own case, learning where the balance point is with each individual, learning how hard to push. She will need to take an action, reflect on what happened, and consider her alternatives. Over time, she’ll develop a catalogue of alternatives that she can use in this project, and beyond. She develops this catalogue by reflecting on what she did, with another person. It doesn’t seem to work quite so well if you reflect on your own, though certainly journaling has been known to be helpful to some people. In our experience though, when the action is

intense, most people are not likely to write down their thoughts. Another person, someone who is trusted, helps deepen the process of reflection by asking useful questions.

Feedback

Most of you who have been traditionally trained in performance-oriented coaching may at this point be wondering what happened to feedback. Surprisingly, we haven't even gotten there yet. In fact, we may not get there at all in some cases. Why? The process of reflection may obviate the need for feedback. The activity of reflecting has been massively underrated over the years, particularly in business. Most people, however, when faced with a real challenge, greatly value the opportunity to stop and reflect. In some respects then, we're trying to redress the imbalance between reflection and feedback, and draw your attention to consideration of how you can become better at facilitating reflection.

However, feedback still has its place. We don't see much of what we might classically think of as feedback in these conversations. Let's say though that Tonia, who is capable of pushing others as we noted, wasn't self-aware of this tendency. Think of feedback as data that fill in the gaps left by the process of personal reflection. Perhaps she had a "blind spot" as it has often been called. As such, she might need to better understand the impact of her behavior. The only way to address a blind spot is to become more aware of it, from the perspective of the other.

Feedback should then be used to support an individual's learning. Too often, though, feedback is in fact used as a punishment. If you have to punish someone, so be it. You may find it useful or necessary to explain to the individual being punished the nature of his or her transgressions. Rationales for punishment should not be confused with feedback, however. Typically though, when working with a good performer, punishment is really not on the agenda, even though good performers can make frustrating mistakes.

We should also stress here one often overlooked aspect of providing effective feedback. The coaching manager ideally needs to be able to spot, to observe, examples of good and poor performance so that she'll be in a position to provide feedback when appropriate, or at least be able to utilize such data as reported by others. This requires that the coaching manager be somewhat close to the action and keep her eyes open for potential opportunities to observe the coachee's actions and debrief with the coachee soon after the action takes place. It also requires that the coaching manager try

to maintain a position of objectivity. In a sensitive situation such as Tonia's, Ashok is probably right to speak with her frequently, even if briefly.

Of course the virtual world we inhabit now doesn't make this any easier. As would be the case in many companies, Tonia and Ashok are in different parts of their country. They could be on different sides of the world. They might see each other once or twice each year, if that. How can Ashok be effective at helping Tonia if he doesn't see her in action? This is a challenge that does not succumb to easy remedies, we must admit. We'll talk more about this thorny issue later in the book. Needless to say, we do believe that it's not an all-or-none situation for the coaching manager, though it may require some clever thought. Over the past few years in particular, we have heard from coaching managers who are successful at helping their coachees by telephone in particular. Ashok did insist on meeting everyone face to face and does bring the team together on a regular basis. Not all managers have the budget for such an effort, though it does help.

In addition to the virtual world, however, the psychological processes of perception and cognition tend to degrade the data we do obtain even if we are right next door. We can see a single behavioral act, for instance, and easily misjudge its meaning. We live harried lives. It saves time to (often unconsciously) draw an inference or, as we more commonly state it, jump to conclusions. Ashok could have easily misjudged what happened in Tonia's second meeting. He was sure it didn't go well, and was concerned that Tonia may not have handled the situation as he would have, but in this case, he could only support her conclusion that she needed to try again. He did so without sounding an alarm, even if he felt one inside.

Coaching managers can be a bit like scientists. They observe and then form tentative conclusions about the object of their observations. But they are tentative. What those observations actually mean can usually be determined only through the coaching dialogue. Ashok was confident that he and Tonia would keep talking and that he would learn more after her meeting the next day.

To preview one of our basic tools, we've found it useful to think about observing for and providing feedback that is directed at one or more of the following three aspects of action:

Intent: What the coachee was trying to do. Tonia was trying to build a relationship with Sam.

Action: Tonia was surprised by the depth of Sam's anger and didn't respond well, at least in her view. More specifically, she just listened.

Impact: Tonia had a bit of a blind spot here. In fact, her reaction, to just listen, may well have been the right action to take, though she did so more because she was caught off guard. She needs to understand that rather than appear weak, she in fact may have been doing the right thing. However, listening by itself was not going to be enough.

Of course, when coaching managers personally deliver feedback, a respectful, if not caring attitude is essential. If coachees define learning goals, they are allowing themselves to be vulnerable to the process of receiving feedback. They have let their defenses down, at least with regard to particular learning needs. It is the coach's job to help maintain individuals' sense of comfort, to the highest degree possible, so their collaborative efforts can continue.

However, this does not mean that such feedback can't be critical. Indeed, it often has to be critical. According to our interviews, coaching managers find that to withhold critical feedback as a means of supporting an employee is often seen as gratuitous. In a coaching culture environment, critical feedback is taken less personally, particularly if it is directed at the learner's actual goals and behaviors. Balanced feedback helps the employee see himself or herself as clearly as possible, even if that's sometimes painful.

Though there wasn't a great deal of obvious feedback in these conversations, we would add that in actuality, Ashok was providing some very important feedback to Tonia. His lack of a sense of alarm told Tonia some important information. He trusts her and thinks she can handle it, even if she's a bit confused at this point. He tells her, implicitly, that the situation isn't that bad and that she may be on the right track, though she needs to take more time with Sam. It is important to remember that we are always providing feedback to one another even if we're not explicitly doing so.

Follow Through and the Action Planing

We've all seen development plans. Typically, they take place along with our performance reviews and often involve targeted learning activities such as courses that we hope will help us build a particular skill set here. Too often though, such plans are not terribly useful. The reason is that they do not take into account how adults learn, as we discussed in Chapter 1. Again, adults learn by taking action in relation to some type of goal, reflection, feedback, and revising their action plans accordingly. As such, a good development

plan should be outcome oriented. There should be something that the individual is going to accomplish related to challenge he or she is facing. Learning activities then aide in that process. An action plan is far more specific, but that allows one to narrow down on the issues at hand.

Let's say you work in purchasing, a function in which you're probably engaging in a variety of negotiations with many different stakeholders. You want to improve your negotiating skills. You suggest taking a course in negotiations. That certainly seems reasonable, but if I were your coaching manager, I'd want to know who you were going to negotiate with, what kind of trouble you were running into, and how you were learning from those experiences. Yes, the course would help, but it is the application of such knowledge, in real time, that will really facilitate your learning.

In this case, Tonia has a plan. She is going to get every member of her team engaged with the new plan. As we can see, this is going to be a challenge. The plan for her learning is, among other things, a regular call with Ashok to review what happened. This will result in a business achievement. Along the way, she'll learn many useful lessons about how to influence others. She could, in addition, take a course in influencing others. There are many outstanding such courses available. That would mean that she'll be able to apply the lessons from the course to her work though, and after all, isn't that the real payoff for everyone. If she can get some help in applying her influence skills, it could be a very important step for her.

The action plan, perhaps more so than the other factors in the model except for the opportunity can also be a driver of learning. Learning in most cases requires iteration, multiple attempts at dealing with a particular challenge. The action plan says to the coachee, "try it again." The follow up, the next conversation, communicates to the coachee that taking action is indeed necessary. This helps to make sure that the approach to learning does not become too academic. Coaching has a destination.

As You Experiment With Coaching

If you're reading this book, we assume that you are in fact engaged in a learning-oriented activity. You want to learn how to become a better coaching manager. That is terrific. The challenge before you though is to apply those skills. That means you're going to have to experiment. Where could you try some of the ideas that are discussed here? With whom can you reflect on what happens when you try those experiments? How can you get some feedback to help you better understand your intent, your actions, and the

impact of your actions? How can you keep the learning cycle moving forward? As we said earlier, you learn to coach by coaching. If you keep these questions in mind though, you'll be in a better position to harvest the gains of your efforts. We'll now move to explore the components of the developmental coaching model in much greater depth.

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