The Manager as Coach
(Eight Key Ideas Beyond "Performance Management")
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Petra Leadership Solutions

INTRODUCTION

In our work as executive coaches and consultants to management, we have had the pleasure of learning a lot about leadership and performance management from successful and not-so-successful leaders. While the full scope of the art and science of developing potential is far larger than can be presented here, we believe that the following principles and ideas are useful for managers faced with getting the most from their people. It is a fundamental truth that **the better the leadership, the better the business outcomes.** Although this truth is often overlooked in our "get-results-now" business climate, the value in developing your people (and yourself) is well worth the extra effort it takes, as all business success hinges on the quality of leadership. Therefore, it is incumbent on the manager who is in a leadership role to work on developing their own leadership, even as they work to develop the capability of those around them.

1. Discovering the Reality of Motivation, Capability and Performance

Our myths of high-performance are deeply embedded. Since grade school, we have been told tales of political, business, military, civil rights, and athletic leadership. We hold the highest levels of performance as models to strive for. Yet most people, perhaps less than 10%, are truly "A" players. Most are what have been termed "B's" and "C's". This terminology turns the complex world of talent assessment and leadership into too simplistic a model. For instance, in the "war for talent" it is recommended that you try and get as many "A" players as possible. Yet "A" players are prone to abandon one company for a better offer elsewhere, especially if they feel they aren't given top billing and fast-track advancement (which just may not be practical in some situations. Thus, striving for a stable full of "A" players is asking for a high-maintenance staff and high-levels of politics. And, there is no certainty that you'll win in the long-term over a steadier, though less "star-worthy" group of motivated "B" players.

Most of those in the Management ranks (many of whom are "A" players or "High-B's") assume that most people have adopted models for performance just like themselves. They have come to expect that people are just as motivated as they are to achieve high goals, to gain recognition, and to deliver quality with urgency. The real picture is not so optimistic. Yes, there is plenty of motivation out there, but not everyone is motivated by the same things, and not everyone's drive, ambition or other capabilities are the same. Ultimately, it is up to the leader to discover the reality of each person's motivations, capabilities. Once a realistic appraisal has been done, it is the leader's duty to creatively find ways to get the most out of them so they can perform in ways that are useful for organizational success.

The Take-Away: *The promise of performance hinges on holding realistic expectations, and working to see that ALL people have strengths that can be leveraged for success, and weaknesses that must be managed to avert problems. Only when we relinquish our illusions and establish realistic expectations for performance can we discover where and how we can truly achieve growth.*

2. Leading by Example

The number one reason that de-motivates people at work is that they do not get along with their manager. This fact indicates two things: One, most people are intrinsically motivated to contribute, and two, that the quality of leadership is crucial to getting the most from that motivation. In our leadership workshops, when I ask managers "What is Leadership?" one of the the most common responses is "Being an Example." One of the key behaviors in *Being an Example* is providing feedback, both positive in the form of recognition for good effort and results, and negative in the form of observations of poor performance, and/or suggestions to get better. Many Managers have a hard time with this, either in the very act of doing it, or in the style with which they do it. They may excel at "stroking" their people, but have a hard time giving critical,

corrective feedback. Or alternately, they may excel at giving critical feedback, but be poor at providing positive strokes.

The Leader can make it easier to give and receive feedback if they practice two principles: Appreciation, and Honesty. Both may require some emotional discomfort, depending on the leader's personality. Those leaders who are usually unsatisfied with progress and are critical of the lack of performance can lead by actively practicing appreciation of strengths and successes, and verbalize them when they are noticed. Better yet, they can actively work at finding things worth appreciating every day. This will tend to motivate those who are chronically down on themselves, and can help them build confidence. Those leaders who are afraid to comment on poor performance can lead by example by having their subordinates evaluate their own leadership. Such "request for candor" on the part of the leader, followed by an honest reporting back of the leader's strengths and weaknesses, makes it easier for the leader to give feedback to others because they have "role-modeled" how to receive and use "negative" feedback responsibly. Further, it allows the leader to "give" what he or she has "taken," thus fulfilling an equitable "give-and-take."

The Take-Away: A*ppreciating positive activity and honestly confronting poor- or off-purpose performance can best be achieved by starting with yourself. Demonstrating how to receive positive feedback and appreciate positive performance, or handle criticism with poise, are great way to "lead by example" when you need to manage the performance of others.*

3. Aligning Talent

It is an obligation of leaders to do their best job of aligning the available talent in the organization with the needed activity. Jim Collins research into successful companies reveals that "getting the right people 'on the bus' and in the right seats" is a keystone for greatness. On the other side of the coin, mis-aligned talent is costly in three prime ways. First, <u>output suffers</u> (because people rarely motivate themselves to do things that they are not passionate or good at). Second, <u>team spirit suffers</u> (because people who are in the wrong roles either end up "freeloading," or "disgruntled"). Third, <u>trust in leadership becomes redoded</u> (because subordinates and associates wonder why the heck the leader is not addressing something they see as a real problem!). The concept of "aligning talent" recognizes that not everyone will be good at everything. It requires the leader to make the best and most honest appraisal of individual capability, and then shuffle responsibilities or people in order to best match the person and the job. Dr. John Grinnell's "Nine Capacities for Leadership" is an excellent framework for appraising talent. Once the situation is clear, the leader must then muster courage to make the bold moves necessary. The irony is that in the end, it is usually a relief to all that people get into the right roles that fit their capabilities.

The Take-Away: *Mis-aligned talent is costly, and the challenge of aligning talent can be uncomfortable. Yet real relief and performance improvement occur when talent is properly aligned with needed job activities.*

4. Providing Certainty in Direction

People who just go and do their work everyday so they can get a paycheck may be reliable. They may be good performers. They may be rock-solid-citizens and nice, friendly people. But they are unlikely to be giving you their best, because the value-equation for them is simple: I put in my work, and I get my paycheck. This is called transactional employment. Transactional employees lack inspiration, yet they are not lost causes. Some may have come to expect transactional employment because their leaders have never elevated their work to anything other than a series of tasks. This is usually due to a blind spot on the leader's part. It is useful for the leader to understand that many people want more, at least in part because in an information-rich society with many choices, employees want to know that the company that they work for has leadership that casts its eye to being successful in the future. Most people want to know where they are going, even if they are just passengers on the train. Leaders and top-performers have an even greater need to know where they are going, for they have personal pride and self-satisfaction tied into the company's future. In attempting to provide a sense of direction for the future, all too much has been made of "vision" and "mission" statements. Much money and time has been wasted by management groups working to construct an "enticing" vision and mission for

their company. Yet despite the excesses of these exercises, the underlying assumption is correct that people want to know where they are going and want to contribute to something greater than themselves.

The Bottom Line: *Real motivational benefits accrue when a leader can help his/her leaders communicate where the organization is heading in the most direct means possible. It is best if this communication is repeated numerous times, and supplemented with visuals to which people can readily refer. (Think of your need to communicate as if it were an "advertising campaign" that gets people to take action: to buy your idea of what you must do to succeed in your business.)*

5. Breaking Inertia

People are creatures of habit. Habits make our life easier, as we do not have to think about how to do something, we just (habitually) do it, like brushing our teeth. Some researchers have indicated that, with only minor adjustments, most adult activity is habitual. Since habit rules our world, an essential leadership skill is to know how to break the inertia of habits when those habits no longer serve our purposes. The first step is recognizing that most activity, even the common condition of "chaos" in the fast-paced world of mortgage refinancing, is still a habit. One key to breaking inertia and allowing people to move with purpose in newer, better ways is using Significant Events. Significant Events provide a real-life instance of a need or a goal that the business must respond to. Significant Events can be used as reference points. To get the value from an event, the leader must elevate it from an abnormality to Something Significant by capturing the emotion necessary to respond to it effectively and directing it into responsible behavior. Otherwise, it is all too easy for people to see it as "busy-ness as usual."

The Take-Away: *Since people are so habit-seeking, Significant Events are required to wake them up and point them in new directions. Leaders must be on the look-out for Significant Events (or be willing to manufacture them) in order to break the inertia of habit. Significant Events form the "pivot-point" for the formation of new habits by establishing both <u>the need for change</u>, and <u>the way to change</u>.*

6. Establishing Teams as "Learning Communities"

Humans are social beings. We "norm" our routines through interaction with others. We gauge our actions, our decision-making, our morality, and our ethics on the basis of the people with whom we interact. We are often profoundly influenced by those with whom we surround ourselves, yet in business, leaders often forget the power of the group to improve the success ratio of each member. Focusing instead on one-on-one coaching and performance management, many leaders fail to reap the power of the group to influence behavior, and to establish patterns of success.

The Take-Away: *In order to get the most from good intentions to alter behavior and improve performance, leaders can capture the power of people's natural inclination to look to the group for support and reinforcement. While work activity itself may be fundamentally an independent affair, the leader can increase the chances of "right action" if he or she will pull people together on a regular basis as a "learning community" to discuss best practices, lessons learned, and to keep accountabilities on the top-of-mind so that "peer pressure and team spirit" can inspire and reinforce effective behavior change and improved performance.*

7. Getting Change to Stick

Okay, so you've got the conditions for change in place: everyone has realistic expectations, you're leading by example, you've made tough decisions and aligned talent, you've provided certainty in direction, you've broken inertia with a significant event, and you have set up a team to keep the spirit of change alive and reinforce performance. What is the key to making change stick? Two words say it all: <u>Accountability</u> and <u>Perseverance</u>. Without the need to account for something, it is difficult to ensure that change happens. And without perseverance or dogged determination, there can be no assurance that the change will be nothing more than a fanciful experiment (that most people have learned to wait-out as a "flavor-of-the-month"). Many times we have seen managers get interested in change without putting these two conditions in place,

only to be disappointed that the best intentions of their plans to change associates' (or their own) behavior did not come to fruition.

The Take-Away: *Once the conditions for change are established, two key pieces complete the puzzle for performance improvement. Measurable accountabilities must be established and reviewed on a constant basis, and continuous effort must be applied, as backsliding is an inevitable fact of human nature. Without measurable accountabilities, there is no real way to know if the change is occurring. Without perseverance---constancy of effort---regression to the old habits is almost assured.*

8. Maintaining Momentum

Human change can occur in an accelerated process if momentum is encouraged. The metaphor of a giant flywheel has often been used to illustrate intentional change. At first, it may take great effort to get the flywheel to move. By making sure that the wheel is actually moving (accountability), sharing the ordeal and encouraging effort (teamwork), and exerting constancy of purpose (follow-through perseverance), the pace increases and it becomes easier and easier to move the flywheel. At some point you reach a sustainable velocity, but if you don't want the flywheel to eventually slow to a stop, then you can't stop exerting effort. Such it is with human change. Reinforcing mechanisms must be put into place to maintain momentum. One-time episodes will not

The Take-Away: *In order to make sure that momentum is secured, consider using tools such as recognition ceremonies (not necessarily formal), performance check-ups, team retreats and rallies, and personal rewards to ensure that the needed performance improvements do not fall to the wayside.*

CONCLUSION

An old joke goes like this: How many psychologists does it take to change a light bulb? Only one, but the light bulb has got to want to change. While these eight principles represent core conditions that support real performance improvement, they are not "100% Guaranteed." Individuals must want to change. Fortunately most people do want to improve. And most people step up to their best ability when the proper leadership conditions are in place, and the leader aligns associates' motivators with the achievement of organization goals.