

5 Better Ways Managers Can Coach Employees

HR Morning | Michele McGovern | December 17, 2024



Managers often struggle to coach employees for a variety of reasons. But this could be the most frustrating one: Employees don't catch on as quickly as you need them to.

Even when managers pride themselves in being good coaches, they often can't seem to get employees on the same page. They might think:

- *"I feel like I'm not getting through to them."*
- *"Don't they hear what I'm saying?"*
- *"They just don't listen to me!"*

Avoid the Blame Game When You Coach Employees

But before pinning the blame on the employee, consider that the problem could be coming from the manager.

Why? A crucial part of coaching is to play to the person's strengths. And managers often forget that critical element.

Consider this: It's useless to coach a 350-pound lineman to be a fleet-footed wide receiver. It's equally as useless to coach a frog to sing like a bluebird.

It helps to think of your employees the same way.

“Coach employees to their strongest abilities and the lessons will pay off,” says David Lee, founder of HumanNature@work.

Step Aside, Please!

And then ... keep yourself out of it!

Coaching isn't the time to wax poetic about how you started at the bottom and hit heights no one expected. How well you do the job has little to do with how your employee can or will perform.

Here are five ways to hone coaching skills, so you invest in employees performing their best and continuing to improve.

1. Let the Employee Define the Problem

Avoid asking employee a question then immediately launching into an explanation or list of problems.

This inhibits the most critical part of a teaching moment — not letting employees give a full answer.

For example, you see an employee struggle with a task and ask, *"Is there something about the process you don't understand?"*

But rather than wait until the employee answers, you keep going: *"Because it's a little tricky if you don't do it very often, and it has to be done in a very specific way – here let me show you."*

Leave it at one question, then let the employee tell you what's wrong.

This not only makes coaching more interactive, it also spares the person from having to listen to an explanation they don't need.

Plus, offering your own fix doesn't teach the employee anything, other than you know what you're doing and they don't.

2. Use Caution When You Point to Errors

Never assume employees *know* they're doing something wrong. It could be something the they don't realize or aren't aware of.

So, avoid interrupting employees while they're in the process of doing something wrong unless it's an absolute emergency. This could come across as though you're spying, and it's demeaning.

For example: *"Um, OK that's wrong. You're not supposed to start cataloging stat sheets before they get final review."*

If it is something that can be easily fixed, bring it to the employee's attention as soon as possible – but resist pouncing on the mistake out of the blue.

Otherwise, the employee might wonder, "Does she peer over my shoulder looking for me to make a mistake all the time?!"

3. Come Up for Air

If you're explaining something – especially if you feel yourself running-on – stop and ask, "Do you have any comments or questions?" or something similar.

Don't just talk at your employees. Talk *with* your employees.

Trying to drill too much information at once can overwhelm them, which is counterproductive. Even a small pause helps keep the person from becoming confused or disinterested – or both.

4. Use Teaching Stories – but Make Them Brief

Teaching stories can help an employee comprehend something, but not if the story goes on for 30 minutes.

Stick to short examples limited to a few minutes or less. Make sure your anecdote relates directly to what you're trying to teach the employee.

Try to intersperse teaching examples with questions, such as, "Can you relate to that?", or "Have you had that kind of an experience?"

This helps the other person stay engaged, and it helps them connect the dots between your story and their situation.

5. Don't Bask in Your Brilliance

As with keeping teaching stories brief, also remember to keep them relevant. Before diving into a coaching story, be clear about why you're doing it.

Ask yourself, "Am I telling this for MY sake or for theirs?"

Good managers tell stories from their past in an attempt to relate to employees on their level. It's effective if you're using a past example of a time *you* slipped up to get employees to understand what *not* to do.

Saying "*I did _____ and realized it was the wrong move because _____*" gives employees a real-life illustration of what they should do (or avoid doing).

But many managers get caught up in the moment, relaying information that's irrelevant to the employee or the task at hand. Stick to lessons that truly help the employee master a new task rather than tangents that waste their time.

Focusing solely on their improvement rather than your own ego makes you a better coach – and brings employees along better, as well.