

[EXPERT OPINION]

When coaching is not the answer

As a professional coach, I am the first to tout the benefits of coaching. I have seen the positive impact of coaching on my clients, the people they manage, and their organizations (and their families). I have also personally benefited from being on the receiving end of coaching. Several studies have shown that coaching can enhance staff engagement, reduce staff turnover, increase client satisfaction, improve the bottom line – and the list goes on.

Yet coaching is no silver bullet. It is not always the correct answer to any question having to do with helping managers identify and overcome the hurdles that prevent them from excelling at their jobs.

How do you know when someone is uncoachable? How do you detect a lost cause? The good news is that the uncoachable situations are easier to spot than you think. It helps to know that managers typically struggle because one of three things is in their way:

SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE

They currently lack the skill or ability to complete the task at hand; this relates to aptitude.

LACK OF KNOWLEDGE. If you think someone is in need of coaching, ask yourself if the issue at hand is related to his lack of knowledge, skills, or abilities in a certain area. If he needs to develop specific skills and abilities, coaching is not the answer. If he doesn't know how to build a budget, he needs training, not coaching. Trying to coach someone around a skill they lack is an exercise in frustration for everyone involved; you would end up driving yourself crazy and the coachee out the door.

NEW TO MANAGEMENT. Do not coach a manager if the situation is totally new and he is truly out of his depth. If he has never experienced the situation before, you will be in for a long and drawn out conversation. For example, would you coach a new manager on Performance Appraisal procedure if he has never done performance evaluation? No, you'd probably give him the appropriate training and guidance or orientation first. Once he is trained, then he can be effectively coached to recall, consider, remember, and work out answers to problems based on what he now knows.

THEMSELVES

They currently lack the motivation, focus, confidence, or commitment to complete the task at hand; this relates to attitude.

DOESN'T THINK HE/SHE HAS A PROBLEM. Coaching is based on trust and the coachee's openness to reflect on his own actions and attitudes, which may be hindering his success. It won't be effective if you just launch

into a coaching conversation – you need to secure agreement by asking, "Would you like to spend some time talking through some ideas?" or "Do you want to talk more about this and figure out a solution?" If he or she doesn't perceive a problem, no matter how much, how hard, or how diligently they are coached, they are not going to change. They are suncoachable because they do not want to change or do not believe that they need to change.

THINKS EVERYONE ELSE IS THE PROBLEM.

Once, I had a client who was concerned about employee morale. His people liked the work, but feedback said that he played favorites in the way he compensated people. When I reported this feedback to him, he agreed with the charge and thought he was right to do so. He hadn't called me in to help him change; he wanted me to fix his employees. It was high time to find the nearest exit. It's impossible to fix people who think something or someone else needs to change before they do.

IS PURSUING THE WRONG STRATEGY FOR THE ORGANIZATION. If a manager is already going in the wrong direction, all you're going to do with coaching is help him or her get there faster.

IS IN THE WRONG JOB. Sometimes managers are offered coaching when it's clear that no matter what you do there's one thing only they can change: how they feel about their job. If it's not a good fit, no amount of coaching will improve the situation. Here's a good way to determine if you're faced with one of these people. Ask them, "If we shut down the company today, would you be relieved, surprised, or sad?" If you hear 'relieved,' send the manager packing. You can't change the behavior of unhappy people so that they become happy. You can only fix behavior that's making people around them unhappy.

EXPECTS YOU TO TELL HIM WHAT TO DO.

Much as we would like to be, coaches are not knights in shining armor arriving just in time on a white charger! Anyone who wants to be rescued from his or her situation by a coach is probably not going to make much progress with coaching. When a manager expects answers from a coach, please resist.



MY SUGGESTION IN CASES LIKE THESE:

FOR COACHES: SAVE TIME, SKIP THE HEROIC MEASURES, AND MOVE ON. THESE ARE SITUATIONS IN WHICH YOU CAN'T EVER WIN.

FOR HR: ASK YOURSELF THESE QUESTIONS

Is this about aptitude? Is there a lack of skills or ability getting in the way of success? If the answer is "yes," then your answer is "no" to coaching.

Is this about attitude — the manager's confidence, commitment, enthusiasm, focus, and frustration? If the answer is "yes," then you have a situation that is primed for coaching.

Is this about an outside factor getting in the way of success? If the answer to this question is "no," you need to reevaluate the answers to all three questions because, chances are, you've missed something along the way. If the answer is "yes," you have two more questions to ask yourself:

Does the manager have the skills and abilities to effectively deal with the outside factors in order to be successful?

Does the manager have difficulty dealing effectively with the outside factors despite having the skills?

If the manager needs skills, teach, if the manager needs help with attitude, coach, but be prepared to offer suggestions and teaching tips along the way — dealing with outside factors can be tricky and there may be some skills you can teach as you go.

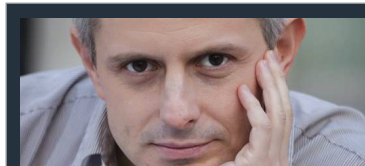
If he or she gets the answer, the coach will be in charge instead of the manager, and if the manager fails the coach will be responsible.

OUTSIDE FACTORS

They are currently being affected by things that are largely outside their control, such as not having the available resources, changing market conditions, or lack of time.

LACK OF RESOURCES. Are external factors keeping the manager from succeeding? Perhaps the problem is a shortage of staff, tight budgets, or – ahem! – lack of direction from higher up. If this is the case, coaching him is not going to help.

LACK OF TIME. If the coachee is overwhelmed, running in and out, or is late to meetings, it's not the time to start coaching. A manager is uncoachable if he or she thinks it's not the right time. This is also true if the results you need are urgent or you are faced with emergencies; when you have to act fast take a different route than coaching. There are times when direct orders are appropriate. If you offer coaching to a manager, and then become frustrated with the process and start telling that manager what to do, you will have done more harm than good – particularly in terms of your relationship with the manager.



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