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Talent & Organization

Accelerating and sustaining leadership power: Developing a culture of coaching

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What's the difference between a good leader and a great one? Good leaders get results, but great ones do so in a way that translates their own positive energy into long-term motivations for the people who work for them—accelerating business results along the way in a sustainable fashion. They can transform an average team into a top-performing team, seemingly in a matter of weeks. The employees who work for such leaders feel empowered, and teams interact in productive and encouraging conversations that ultimately improve productivity and increase the pace of innovation.

What makes these leaders so good? Their ability to *coach*—a leadership capability that is increasingly essential in a marketplace where the performance of critical workforces, the retention of top talent and the ability to create and derive value from innovation are important to competitive advantage.

Although coaching often refers to a way to correct specific performance concerns in the workforce as part of training initiatives, it also has a broader meaning in the context of leadership development and organization culture.

From that larger perspective, coaching is both a mindset and a set of behaviors by which leaders enable their people to assess an issue, identify appropriate actions, participate in decision making and achieve positive business results while simultaneously helping them learn and contribute. Leaders who are good coaches inspire and challenge others in their organizations to grow and develop; ultimately, such leaders are capable of achieving stronger business results than those less supportive and collaborative.

Creating leaders who are good coaches does not happen by accident. It requires specific programs and interventions that (1) give leaders the kind of executive coaching they need to become more effective, and (2) create a broader culture of coaching that can accelerate and sustain the positive impacts of the coaching provided by leaders to those who work with them and for them.

What does coaching-based leadership look like?

At its best, coaching is a mode both of *being* and of *doing*—a mindset as well as a particular way of interacting with groups and with individuals. Coaching is focused on a task or concern that an individual or team has on behalf of the organization. That is, it will look to address the concern and drive toward a positive outcome, but the manner in which the conversation progresses will be much different than simply "solving a problem."

Instead, the adept coach will encourage the active involvement of people in the issues at hand: asking open-ended questions, listening actively and making follow-up inquiries that help employees see their options and think about a path toward a solution. The coach and the employee will brainstorm different options around what the outcome might be, then get more specific about some of the steps needed to reach that outcome.

At the same time, they will also work together to establish accountability: How will you go about attaining the goal? With whose help? What's the value created by reaching the objective and the cost if it isn't reached? As the employee progresses toward the goal, the coach will inquire about what is being learned along the way.

In sum, a good coach acts as the accelerator by which an employee takes positive steps toward a goal and reflects upon the lessons from the experience so that they are better able to achieve future goals.

Enhancing leadership and culture effectiveness

When and why would an organization want to implement a program to develop or enhance its coaching capabilities in a leadership context?

Consider one US federal agency that has a comprehensive "hire-to-retire" leadership curriculum for its workforce at all levels. With the help of Accenture, the agency created a leadership development program with a strong emphasis on coaching to increase effective communications and foster a culture shift such that all employees would be empowered to view themselves as leaders. The program was also designed to speed leaders to proficiency in new roles, improve confidence in decision making, and increase engagement and productivity among individuals and teams.

The agency has implemented a scorecard that assesses its progress toward enhancing its leadership skills and measures the impact of those improved skills on the broader culture.

Creating a more mature coaching culture

Building a sustainable coaching culture aids organizations in creating the next generation of leaders—it is one way by which a company can execute leadership development at scale. For an organization to cultivate a coaching culture, the organization's espoused values and intent to integrate coaching into the daily fabric must align with the individual actions and mindsets of its employees and leaders.

One helpful tool to advance the development of a coaching culture is a Coaching Skills Maturity Model developed by Accenture. It assesses an organization's current coaching culture and serves as a potential blueprint for helping individuals as well as the broader organization advance from "foundational" to "progressive" to "pioneering" in its coaching capabilities.

For example, an individual leader at the foundational level when it comes to listening skills might still react defensively when sensing negativity and may wish to be "right," no matter what. At the progressive level, a person resists becoming defensive and judgmental, and is able to listen empathetically, with curiosity and interest. A leader who has reached the pioneering level picks up on nuances of tone and energy and is able to use curiosity to search for the bigger picture for both individuals and the organization.

An example of maturity at the organizational level is in advancing the scope of coaching efforts to influence the general culture. At the lowest level, organizations engage coaches only on an as-needed basis and in a decentralized way. Companies at the progressive level are more rigorous in developing leaders with coaching skills, and have established a community of practice to support the development of those skills. At the pioneering level, coaching is woven into all interactions, both internal and external, and all employees are encouraged to demonstrate coach-like behaviors to drive results.

The maturity model can help organizations and individuals understand what is needed to advance to the next level of coaching maturity while also acknowledging the skills and behaviors that have already been developed and integrated into the culture.

Investing in a coaching culture

Organizations whose leaders have not yet developed the mindsets and behaviors of coaching may be at risk. They may be less innovative because they are unable to take advantage of the full range of ideas and knowledge at all levels of an organization.

They may lose key employees by not adequately developing them and keeping them sufficiently engaged. They may not meet current strategic goals because they do not effectively harness the collective capabilities of the employee base, and then do not envision the future in a collective way such that future goals can be defined and met.

To avoid those risks, consider three tasks as foremost on your list. First, invest in creating coaching skills at all levels of your organization. Coaching should be a central part of any leadership development curriculum, with a learning approach that emphasizes action learning and simulated interactions. Second, provide ongoing support and development for leaders in modeling coaching behaviors and then for individuals at all levels to adopt those behaviors. Finally, measure, recognize and reward effective coaching as it is demonstrated by individuals, teams and across the enterprise to create stronger accountability.

Pioneering organizations establish formal programs to develop good coaches and simultaneously weave coaching into the fabric of their culture. They also measure progress—and then celebrate when significant achievements are made.