

## The Consulting Challenge – Trying On a Coaching Style

The latest Harvard Business Online update reminds us that there's one key talent behind managerial excellence: the ability to deliver tangible, measurable results time and time again. Among the management challenges HBO names are: Motivating People for Improved Performance, Face-to-Face Communication for Clarity and Impact, and Getting People on Board. Success in all of these areas depends foremost on managers' communication skills – and specifically, their ability to make an impact while recognising the strengths and knowledge of their co-workers. For many, the key to this balancing act lies in adopting a 'coaching style'. These managers know they ultimately deliver their results through their teams. And this makes fostering and guiding their co-workers an obvious priority.

### “But Why Don't They Listen?”

Over the years, I've heard frustrated leaders ask why their efforts to share experiences and insights with colleagues so often go ignored or resented. We live in an era dominated by *homo economicus* and the question “How can I get from a to b based on the smallest possible investment?” So shouldn't we all be rushing to learn from others' strategies and reports? The answer is: “Yes, in theory”. In fact, many of today's consulting and training professionals try to stimulate learning through case studies, benchmarking, and best practices. And yet, often enough, their lectures fall into the basket of unwanted advice; like so much other unsolicited information, their instructions are ignored if the listener can afford to do so, or taken on reluctantly if they just can't be ignored.

One obvious reason that listeners reject this advice is that it speaks to everything but what's on their minds: their personal interests. The coaching process, in contrast, puts the individual firmly back in the equation. Good coaches acknowledge that not all roads to success are equally accessible to all people in a given situation. So they work with individuals to create solutions that address and cultivate their needs and personalities. Great mentors and consultants have probably always done this intuitively; they've understood that it's not enough to analyse the external

pressures at play in any situation. The real challenge lies in channelling the unique resources of the persons at its centre.

### Getting Managers to Play Team

It's no surprise that coaching is hard work for team leaders at the outset. And yet, there are many effective coaching techniques that require little time investment from managers (depending on the individual concerned). Being a coach to your staff may initially take more effort than handing out instructions, but the long-term rewards are striking: Once you learn to focus on what your team really needs from you, you're no longer forced to jump into exhausting 'problem-solving mode' whenever someone enters your office. Nor does this mean you have to dress up your own 'correct' answer through a soft-sell approach to your charges. Instead, you assume that the best solution to every problem can be tailor-made with its bearer, and you guide each individual to locate his or her optimal routine.

Ultimately it's the managers who benefit most from coaching their people. With the support of a goal-focused team, their lives become easier and they're left with more time and energy to pursue their own goals.

### Coaching Made Easy

Let's start with the good news: everybody can be a coach for at least some of those around them. Try using the following simple suggestions with someone you consider as 'neutral' on your team:

- Listen attentively to where this person is really heading when they talk. Don't take over!
- Help them to identify stumbling blocks as they come to light (Focus on 'solution talk' together instead of 'problem talk'.)
- Think about ways to shift these blocks.

- Help them to formulate 'key questions': ask yourself what they really need from you in order to move on. This may be a reassessment of their situation, more information, your go-ahead, or something completely different. (Then ask them what they need.)
- Remember that it's often better to come away from a meeting with a challenging question than a snappy answer. And make sure your direct report works hardest in the discussion. Your job is to help them discover the options and constraints in their thinking.
- Don't forget that this is their problem; they will take it away with them after your discussion.

Surprisingly, this little exercise proves very difficult for some people. They may find themselves confronted with their basic or unconscious assumptions about people's work styles, motivations, and performance incentives. Or their patience may be tested by those team members who tick very differently from themselves. Typically, our assessments are spot-on when it comes to people who respond and function like we do. Those wired otherwise get readily dismissed as 'lazy and incompetent'.

This brings us to a conundrum which every good coach and successful manager knows: The key to guiding someone else's thinking is that you must already have faith and respect in their abilities. Otherwise, your negative beliefs will inhibit any progress; the people you judged incapable and non-compliant will magically prove themselves to be so.

If you find that ingrained beliefs about your people are stunting the growth of your team, you may gain from examining the situation from a new perspective. Remember that all it takes is some 'change energy' and a few committed sessions with a professional coach. Happy New Year!



Annette Reissfelder is an experienced freelance coach who works with managers to develop leadership styles that reflect their potential fully and generate optimal results from their teams. She coaches in English, Czech, and German in several CEE countries. For more information, see [www.an-edge-for-you.com](http://www.an-edge-for-you.com) and the 'Coaching in Action' brochure in this month's FOCUS magazine.

## THE ENGLISH COLLEGE IN PRAGUE

**Patrons:** Former President Václav Havel, The Prince of Wales

**Headmaster:** Peter de Voil MA FRSA

**Non-profit-making Secondary School for students aged 13–19**

- IGCSE and IB programmes taught in English
- Scholarships available for talented musicians
- Wide range of extra-curricular activities
- Among the most successful IB schools in the world
- Assessed as 'outstanding' by Czech School Inspectorate
- Member of COBISEC, HMC

For details, please contact: Mrs Jana Kloudová  
The English College, Sokolovská 320, 190 00 Praha 9 – Vysočany  
Tel.: +420 283 893 113, E-mail: [office@englishcollege.cz](mailto:office@englishcollege.cz)

[www.englishcollege.cz](http://www.englishcollege.cz)

