



LEADERS AS COACHES: EXPERIENCE IS NOT THE BEST TEACHER

Your most experienced leaders may be your worst coaches. They may need additional training on delivering messages in small, timely chunks; active listening; and showing appreciation.

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The airplane was bucking and kicking like a mad bull as we began our final approach. The captain came on the intercom and using his calm, confident, *The Right Stuff* voice, assured us of a safe landing. “Folks,” he said, “your copilot and I have 27 years and thousands of hours of experience between us. And we have families waiting for us, too.”

With that, the flight crew wrestled the plane to a relatively smooth landing (and applause from the passengers). The pilots’ experience was reassuring, but equally important in this situation was the ongoing training, practice in flight simulators, and recertifications these pilots underwent to ensure their skills supported their experience.

For many professions—doctors, accountants, first responders, etc.—ongoing training is required to ensure top performance. One profession that does not require ongoing training is leadership, where the vaunted 70-20-10 formula for development promotes experience as the pathway to proficiency (after some initial training). However, research shows that for one of the most important leadership skills—coaching—experience is a poor teacher.

In a recent study, *Driving Workplace Performance Through High-Quality Conversations*, Development Dimensions International’s (DDI) analysis of thousands of assessments confirmed that experienced leaders lack critical coaching skills.

This research, which looked specifically at data from assessments of executives—typically the most experienced leaders in an organization—revealed significant coaching skill deficiencies:

- Ninety percent of executives are not effective in checking their understanding of a situation before moving on to addressing an issue.
- More than half are not effective at encouraging involvement from others.
- Eighty-nine percent are not effective in demonstrating interpersonal diplomacy.
- Also, 89 percent are not effective in conveying performance expectations and facilitating clear agreement.
- Ninety-five percent are not effective in openly disclosing and sharing their thoughts and feelings with others.

So how do these experienced executives compare with newer front-line leaders? About the same. A similar analysis of more than 1,000 front-line leader assessments found there is little difference in levels of coaching skills.

Clearly, experience alone does not develop or improve coaching skills. Perhaps this should not be a surprise. The fundamental skills and concepts of coaching remain constant, even as leaders gain experience and change roles; however, the environment has changed. Even a leader with a strong foundation of coaching skills must adapt and further hone his or her approach as the workforce and workplace evolve.

So what does it take to be an effective coach in today's turbulent environment?

1. GOOD COACHES USE TIME. Coaching now takes place via informal methods. Communication is immediate and 24/7. We interact with each other in short bursts, with direct reports who are in other cities or countries. The days of leading sit-down conversations across the conference table for a 30-minute coaching discussion are gone. That's a luxury no one seems to have time for anymore.

Today's most effective leaders know how to coach "on the fly." They lead formal discussions with non-traditional or asynchronous means. These leaders coach by phone, by e-mail, and even by social media when appropriate.

The coaching messages may be delivered now in smaller bites, but they still have purpose and importance. The leader connects the discussions and guides the employee through the coaching process over a series of conversations. This is not easy to do. Most leaders do not develop this skill on their own.

What approach do ineffective leaders use? The approach we hear most often is "spray and pray." That is, these leaders do a quick "tell," disgorging all of their accumulated experience and hope it's enough to prevent the person from failing or getting in trouble. We also see a lack of proactive coaching (i.e., coaching before a person takes on a difficult task or assignment) and an increase in reactive coaching (providing advice after the fact).

2. GOOD COACHES ASK INSIGHTFUL QUESTIONS. A key part of coaching involves asking high-gain, insightful questions. While effective coaches will balance "seeking and telling," great coaches make the most of the seeking opportunity. They remember to ask clarifying questions—those that will help employees discover insight into themselves, the situation, and the other people involved.

These strategic questions lead to better solutions. They also foster higher levels of commitment to taking action in a coaching situation, whether it's proactive coaching or reactive coaching. It works both ways.

Some leaders discover this method through trial and error. They find that, over time, when they ask these types of questions, the results are much better. However, savvy organizations do not leave this to

chance as many smart businesspeople will not learn this through experience. In fact, our assessment data show that most leaders skip or do very poorly at clarifying. Active listening is a hallmark of the best leaders, but most need help to develop this critical skill.

3. GOOD COACHES SHOW APPRECIATION. Effective leaders find ways to genuinely and regularly show appreciation for their employees.

At DDI, we long have advocated the use of the "STAR" approach to provide relevant behavioral feedback. Using this model, a leader describes the Situation/Task (ST) the individual or group handled, such as a problem, opportunity, special challenge, or routine task. The leader also notes the Action (A) the person or group took, including what they said or did, as well as validating the positive Result (R).

The STAR acronym also can be used as a shorthand reference to an especially effective model for showing appreciation:

- **The Situation over Time (ST):** The leader has noticed the individual having an impact.
- **The relevant Attribute (A):** What is it about the individual the leader knows he or she can count on?
- **The Result (R)** or impact of the person's attributes.

STAR appreciation goes beyond behavior and recognizes who the person is, as much as what he or she does. But it can require a careful touch, which is why we view it as an advanced coaching skill—one leaders can develop only after mastering basic interaction skills.

THE DEVELOPMENT GAP

Your most experienced leaders may be your worst coaches. The importance and impact of coaching rises as leaders move up the leadership pipeline. So does the complexity and difficulty of workplace challenges. Yet many managers and executives rely on skills learned in their first years as a new leader.

Just as we want experienced and well-trained pilots and doctors to handle our most challenging situations, we need capable leaders at all levels to navigate through today's volatile and uncertain business environment. These leaders need more than just experience to be successful. 