

Comment



DOWNEY

COACHING AND CONSULTANCY

The Line-Manager's Role and the Place of Coaching

Performance matters.

Learning matters.

It was always so, but never more so than now.

In the relationship between the manager and the managed, the manager's influence on the performance and learning of the managed is a critical and, in practice, a much-neglected factor. How many managers get out of bed and ask themselves,

"What can I do today to get the best from my team?"

It is not really the primary focus.

The capacity of the manager to influence the learning and performance of another is called coaching.

"Can't we call it something else?"

This is an almost constant question from people who have come to understand what coaching is and what it can offer their organisations. As often as not these people are the MDs, the CEOs, the Managing Partners. Behind the question is a concern that coaching has not been fully understood in their organisation and that, as a consequence, a significant opportunity to transform performance, learning and enjoyment has been lost. There is also fear that it has been lost to the organisation for quite some time, because those who participate once in a failed initiative will be even more difficult to engage a second time around. The hope is that calling coaching something else will lift it out of 'flavour of the month' territory and allow the management population to take it more seriously.

Ask a group of managers what it is that stops them from coaching and you will hear some of the following answers:

- it takes too much time
- they don't want to be coached
- my boss tells me to stop wasting time and get on with it
- it's HR's job to do the training.

While there is something behind these responses there is something else that inhibits line-managers from coaching that is both more powerful and more obscure. Most line-managers do not coach because of their own needs:

- to be in control
- to be right
- to be valued/the hero
- to fix others
- to heal others.

Coaching requires the strength to be open, to be willing to give up one's own agenda, to be vulnerable – and these are not qualities that are valued in organisations.

The reality is that few line-managers see coaching as a fundamental or central part of their role. At best, some will see it as a part of their 'toolkit'. In my experience this means that it will never see the light of day again – rather like a weekend DIYer who buys an expensive piece of kit, a chrome vanadium three-piece torsion wrench, that never makes it out of the wrapping.

In fairness, most of the organisational cultures in which our line-managers work, are not conducive to coaching. Few organisational cultures really value learning and most suffer from such chronic short-termism that anything that apparently distracts focus from the immediate task is neglected.

Part of this difficulty with coaching is that where we have tried to create a 'coaching culture', we have not properly equipped the line-manager for the task. Much of the responsibility for this lies with HR professionals and training providers – people who should know better – and their willingness to offer two-day skill-building workshops to train in the skills. Expecting line-managers to demonstrate these skills without providing them with the appropriate training is like taking a cake out of the oven after a fraction of the required baking time and then wondering why it falls flat. Ultimately, coaching can only be learned by practising it and that takes time and considerable support.

From an organisational perspective we need to be much clearer about the role we are asking our line-managers to perform, and to come to an understanding of where coaching fits within that role. From an individual perspective we each need to transcend the baser needs described earlier (eg the need to be in control) and find a more compelling motive to engage in coaching. The remainder of this article seeks to position the capability to coach in its rightful place in the line-manager's role and to suggest where individuals might find the motivation to do it.

In the past fifteen years the notion that leadership is part of the line-manager's role has come to be accepted in most organisations. We have separated out that part of the role and examined it, defined the component skills, written them into the job description and the values statements, and created training and development programmes. Now coaching is emerging as another critical element of the line-manager's role. The evidence for this is to be found in the press articles, books and conferences that have proliferated in the last ten years and in the ever-increasing demand for coaching skills development programmes. Why coaching has risen up the agenda is not the subject of this article, but I would point to demands to increase productivity and performance, flatter organisations and the need for individuals to take more responsibility sooner, as some of the drivers.

In a similar fashion to that in which leadership has been distinguished from management we need to separate coaching from management and leadership. The diagram overleaf shows three distinct elements to the line-manager's (by line-manager I mean any person who has a responsibility for the performance of others; from CEO to supervisor) role. These elements are Leadership, Management and Coaching.

Depending on circumstances and the nature of the role, one or more of these elements may assume greater importance than another. For instance, a CEO will typically be more concerned with Leadership than a supervisor. The overlap of the circles indicates that some activities may not fall neatly into one domain. For instance, a line-manager may use a facilitative (coaching) style to generate a new vision (leadership) or use coaching skills during an appraisal (a management activity).

The Elements of the Line-Manager's Role

The difficulty here is that I have nominated Management as a subset of itself, and this suggests that we need a new title for the role. Being unwilling to propose such a title in this article I will refer to the role as 'the line-manager's role' and the capability subset as Managing. There is an emerging practice of calling line-managers 'team leaders' or 'coaches'. In many cases, principally where the 'coach' has a management function, this is a mistake. It simply repeats the initial error – defining the role by one of its subsets. In some organisations where there has been a coaching initiative line-managers have seemingly lost the right to manage; they can only coach, often resulting in a loss of appropriate control and endless conversations on issues that are not negotiable.

Much has been written about Leadership and I do not want to get into that discussion here. Suffice to say that by Leadership I mean the element of the role that is concerned with the future. It is concerned with creating a vision, with maintaining that vision and with orchestrating actions in the present that will deliver the vision.

In this model the Management element of the role is essentially about compliance. It is about ensuring that subordinates perform their role within certain parameters. These parameters include: the type and nature of the organisation's business (an employee in a manufacturer of kitchenware cannot, on a whim, start taking orders for a new line of musical instruments); the purpose and goals of the organisation; the requirements of the specific job; performance standards; management processes; the cultural norms and any accepted rules of the company.



As we separate out Coaching from the other elements I want first to assert that coaching has always been part of organisational life; that any time a manager engaged in a conversation with another about how to do a task, that was coaching. It may not have been very effective or elegant but it was coaching. Coaching is the art of facilitating the performance and learning of another. It is the series of conversations that helps individuals understand their roles or tasks, that helps them learn what they need to learn in order to fill a role or complete a task successfully, that develops them for the next role and, on a good day, helps them achieve fulfilment at work and, maybe, a little joy.

Let me draw a parallel with the game of tennis. On a tennis court there are a number of people: the player, his or her opponent, the umpire and the coach. The umpire's

Diagram 1
The Elements of the Line-Manager's Role

role is essentially about compliance. It is his job to ensure that the rules of the game are adhered to. In this sense it is analogous to the management (compliance) element of the line-manager's role. The coach's role is different. His job is to ensure that a player gives his best performance and learns and improves from one match to the next.

The very different roles of the umpire and the coach suggest a different kind of relationship with the player and different corresponding behaviours. The umpire's relationship is invested with authority, given by the governing body. It is, appropriately, a directive, command-and-control, interactive style. The coach's relationship is altogether different. It will be designed to encourage learning and to create a mental state in which the player can give of his best. In fact, the traditional model of sports coaching where the coach is the expert and where the interactive style is quite directive – the coach instructs and gives advice – is not the most conducive to high performance and learning. The most effective coaching style is facilitative; based on listening and allowing players to develop their own solutions. More on this later.

The difficulty we are faced with here is that, for most people, those whom they have encountered in their lives who have been charged with helping them perform or learn effectively have also had a management responsibility. Teachers teach, but they also ensure discipline in the class and, at certain times, pass judgement on their pupils' efforts – judgements that dictate the immediate future. This is true for line-managers too. For the most part neither professional has recognised that the style appropriate to encouraging performance and learning works less well when applied to management issues. Line-managers try to handle performance and learning issues with a

management style – command and control – rather than a more facilitative style. The umpire and the coach in my earlier analogy have it easy as the role is split between them. The line-manager has to 'wear both hats'.

One way of understanding this need to adopt different approaches is to draw a vertical line through the middle of the three circles (see Diagram 2). The left-hand side of the line represents those things that are the concern of the organisation: its needs, aims and objectives. On this side of the line the organisation has authority. When you join an organisation you sign up to that authority in the same way that a tennis player agrees to be bound by the rules of the game of tennis. The area on the right-hand side of the line represents those things that are the concern of the individual: their needs, aims and objectives. On this side of the line the individual has authority.

The Line-Manager's Role and Authority

The word authority can give us an insight here. It has the same Latin root as the word author: a writer, someone who creates. The root is *auctum* which means, amongst other things, to produce, to increase, to cause to grow (*Shorter Oxford Dictionary on Historical Principles*). An author writes his own book. A manager dictating the book to be written would soon wear the patience of the writer, turning him into a mere scribe and thus destroying his motivation and, in time, his very ability to be creative. So on the right-hand side of the diagram, where the individual has authority, instructing or telling that individual is less effective than listening and asking questions such that they come to their own solution or insight.

In the hurly-burly of everyday working life few line-managers slow down enough to ask themselves whether a given issue in relation to a direct report is a management issue or a coaching issue and then, given they can make the distinction, adopt the appropriate approach. The learning that has been lost to individuals and organisations because a line-manager has imposed his 'right' answer, when he could have asked a simple question – "What's your answer to that?" – is beyond measure.

Re-introducing the third circle, leadership, the line down the middle retains its validity. Sometimes it will be appropriate for leaders to make a clear and unequivocal statement about a direction to take or to take a difficult decision without referring to others. At other times they may adopt a more facilitative approach to a leadership issue and elicit a decision from others.

When we distinguish both sides of the vertical line, the management element assumes less importance. As you place authority where it mostly belongs – with the doer – the need to manage diminishes. It does not go away, it diminishes. The popular notion of empowerment recognises this, although it rarely goes far enough.

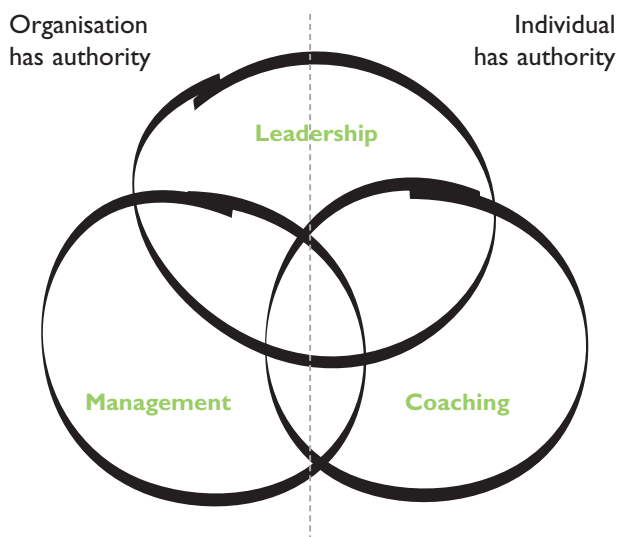


Diagram 2
The Line-Manager's Role and Authority

The Range of Coaching Approaches

On a larger scale, there are a number of forces at play in the workplace that will almost certainly cause us to invest more in coaching. Some of these I have mentioned earlier in this article, but there is another that will leave us with almost no choice. The generation entering the workforce at the moment provides us with a new challenge. This generation has a very different relationship with authority than I, for one, ever did. Personally, I blame the Spice Girls ("tell me what you want, what you really want") and "girl power". It will not be possible to dictate to, control and bully this generation.

We will have to adopt a more facilitative and coaching style and operate more at the non-directive end of a range of coaching approaches (see Diagram 3). No doubt we will respond to these drivers, possibly somewhat grudgingly, as the petrochemical and agribusiness concerns respond to the green agenda.

We can respond to these drivers, respond out of 'need', but that is ultimately exhausting. There is a far more positive, fulfilling and life-enhancing place to come from. A more compelling vision. Our workplaces for the most part are not places of great joy where people flourish. The constant demands of the organisation and the fear-based command-and-control approach to people, deny and crush the human spirit – interestingly, not just the spirit of the victim but also, if not more so, that of the perpetrator. The line-manager who places coaching at the very heart of his role will see not just a different order of result, but the renewed spirit of those he manages, and will experience the profound joy of seeing others flourish. That is something to get out of bed for.

Performance matters. Learning matters. Coaching doesn't just matter; it can make a difference. And when it comes down to it most people want, more than anything else, to make a difference.



Diagram 3
The Range of Coaching Approaches

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