



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

COACHING FROM BELOW

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Even top leaders can have blind spots in some areas of their behavior, and so fail to see the true impact of their conduct on others. When this is the case, the most precious gift one person can give another is candid, caring feedback.

Most modern organizations have a 360° process that allows managers to collect feedback from multiple sources. This worthy effort needs to be encouraged, but it is not sufficient. In fact, a manager does not necessarily need company-sponsored programs, electronic forms, or even paper and pencil to receive feedback.

In my experience, the most insightful sources of feedback are often the most overlooked. Valuable sources include those people who have known us for a long time. They include those who have worked with us and for us over time and our families. All these people will have held a long-term, unadulterated, and unvarnished view of us. We often forget that these durable audiences will not be fooled by our facades; they can see through our many facets as easily as if we were a piece of glass. They can provide a wealth of feedback and coaching for us—if only we have the courage to tap into their knowledge. I call this “coaching from below.”

For coaching from below to be successful, three factors (described below) must be in place. Within an organizational context, our subordinates are often able to provide us with a rich source of feedback. However, the success factors described here apply equally well to others outside the workplace setting.

Creating a Safe Climate

A safe climate for giving feedback is the most critical prerequisite for receiving candid feedback. In the past, organizations have been hierarchical, which has fostered a one-way, up-down, mode of communication that offers little opportunity for quality feedback. This command-and-control culture will be a competitive disadvantage in the future, because the success of tomorrow's organization will be based on intellectual capital and open communication between team members, employees, and managers.

With this in mind, managers must create a climate of complete safety and actively seek out feedback from key high-performing subordinates. An informal contract should be developed between manager and employee, so that feedback can be given without fear, and so that specific areas in which feedback would be most beneficial are defined.

Do not expect employees to be candid just because you ask for candor. This is probably a new experience for many subordinates and can be daunting for any number of reasons. Perhaps the person does not have full confidence in his or her ability to give feedback—but more importantly—the person may not believe that you truly want honest feedback. Let people test you. You need to win them over with patience and sincerity. Remember the cyclical nature of this process. Your subordinates will be willing to coach you when and if they trust you, and such trust will be augmented by your reactions and responses to their feedback.

Using Effective Feedback and Communication Skills

The manager receiving coaching from below must possess a cluster of excellent communication skills in order for the process to work effectively.

It is necessary to suspend all traces of judgment and defensiveness and to listen merely to learn. This can be difficult because many of us have poor listening skills, which is the problem at the root of most miscommunication. Even with all that Carl Rogers (1961) and others have taught us about the art of listening and the many volumes that have been written on the subject, the basic underlying challenge is that the ears will not listen to what the mind does not want to hear.

Listening is a mind-set issue. To gain a better understanding of the listening mind-set, I would encourage reading the many writings of Chris Argyris (1985) and others. Also, it is important to remember that most of our communication is non-verbal, so, we need to be much more aware of our body language and learn to manage it so that it is consistent with our intentions.

The receiver of coaching should also possess a healthy emotional intelligence—and a sense of humor—when receiving feedback, so as to put it into the proper perspective. Two related skills are helpful in this aspect: first, it is important to set the expectation that not all suggestions will be acted on (for any number of reasons); second, it is important to allow a short finite time for feedback, and then to make a smooth switch back to work. It is necessary to be able to swap the two hats of managing and coaching easily, remembering that coaching is learning and that learning should be fun!

Practicing Self-Discipline

Having received feedback and coaching from a junior, the ball is in the court of the senior person. It is helpful to reflect on the coaching received and then focus on one or two valid areas. Marshall Goldsmith, the feedback guru, warns his clients that any more than two issues is too many for anyone to handle at one time (Goldsmith, 1996). We might identify and use resources in the form of programs, workshops, courses, books, audio tapes, or videos. An extremely important resource is role models to help us learn new behaviors, enhance or alter existing behaviors, or unlearn old behaviors. But even with the best of intentions, change isn't easy, and old habits of thought and behavior die hard. Patience and relentless

perseverance on one's own part, and also co-opting the employee (or whoever gave the feedback) to become part of a follow-up support system are important ways to ensure victory over old behaviors.

To extinguish an old behavior, it is often necessary to start practicing a new one. Start by rehearsing in a simulated safe environment. Then, before adopting it more generally, practice the behavior in a low-risk situation until it feels natural. Your efforts will be exponentially more effective if you can muster the additional self-discipline to supplement the actual practice of the new behavior with a recurring visualization of it in authentic detail. Visualization is an extremely powerful technique that cannot be overused.

Conclusions

At home and at work, we are under close scrutiny by those below us. Our subordinates have an intuitive and intimate knowledge of our strengths and weaknesses, our inconsistencies and frailties, and the gaps between our walk and our talk. If we can enroll them to partner with us in a journey of personal growth, the results can be truly amazing.

Our subordinates can help us in a wide range of areas, from fairly benign matters such as time management, prioritization, or meeting management, to much more complex areas in which we are lacking, such as presentation skills, teaming, interpersonal skills, and leadership abilities. They can help us uncover ways to enhance our effectiveness and work relations and manage our own bosses more effectively. Subordinates can help make us aware of our perceived credibility and reputation, and they can alert us to any habits or behaviors that can become potential derailers. They can help us grow personally and professionally, if only we are willing and able to think “out of the box” and embrace a coaching approach.

In such a process of collective self-development, we find a promise to create the dynamic and competitive human organization of tomorrow—a learning organization in which knowledge and self-awareness flow without boundaries. Only when we reaffirm our vulnerability and our humility do we uncover our humanity and reach toward our goals.

About the Contributor

Deepak (Dick) Sethi is a leading authority in the field of executive and leadership development. He is director of executive and leadership development for the Thomson Corporation, a \$6 billion, 40,000 employee information company. Previously, he was assistant director, executive education, for AT&T. The leadership development program for high-potential middle managers and senior executives that he helped design and direct at AT&T is widely considered a leading-edge benchmark program in the country.

Dick's unique leadership development work has been extensively featured in the *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, *NY Newsday*, *Training Directors' Forum Newsletter*, *Corporate University Xchange Newsletter*, and in the book, *Leadership by Design*. He has also been quoted in *Business Week*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Miami Herald*, and the *Economist*. Dick has published articles on leadership in both *The Leader of the Future* (a *Business Week* bestseller) and *The Organization of the Future*. Both books were sponsored by the Peter Drucker Foundation.

In addition to his management development experience and expertise, Dick has had successful sales experience with Mobil Oil in India and with Control Data Corporation in New York and marketing and product management experience with AT&T. He has also taught workshops on entrepreneurship, as adjunct faculty at New York University.

Dick came to the United States as a Rotary Foundation Fellow. He is listed in *Who's Who* and *Who's Who in the World*, and is a frequent speaker at management and leadership development conferences. His interactive presentations and workshops are consistently rated very high by diverse audiences.

Dick is president of the New York Human Resource Planners and is on the board of directors of the national Human Resource Planning Society. He is also on the Leadership Advisory Board of the Peter Drucker Foundation and on the board of the Institute for Management Studies.

