



CHAPTER NINETEEN

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT IN PLACE OF TRAINING

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For the last fifty years, our society has been steeped in the classical methods of learning through formal classroom environments and experiences. We have experienced it at the elementary, secondary, and university levels, and it has continued into the workforce as formal classroom training and weekend seminars. Only in the last few years have organizations acknowledged other constructs as better than the classroom for learning. One of these newer constructs is *coaching*.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the cultural shift from formal learning constructs to a new era, in which traditional classroom training is combined with ongoing coaching to create an atmosphere of continuous learning and improvement. We will begin with a brief review of our current state of leadership development and then move into descriptions of how the new shift is being applied in the areas of medicine, sports, and management. Finally, we will provide a robust coaching model for leadership development.

The Current State of Leadership Development

In general, our approach to leadership development has been similar to our haphazard approach to the development of parents. In our society, some parents pursue development and some do not; some parents do not

want to be bothered with mastering good parenting skills, but still want to be parents (that is, leaders of children). For those of us who have been parents, there is unanimous agreement that good parenting involves the mastery of a particular set of skills needed in few, if any, other endeavors.

In many organizations, leadership development follows a similar course, one that relegates leadership to a low priority position on the skill ladder. We approach leadership as if anyone can do it, as if the skills are acquired by osmosis. Why is it that while there is enough time to strategize and make decisions, and there is certainly enough time to set business goals, review plans, and inspect the numbers, there is seldom enough time to make leadership development a priority? It seems that we believe leadership effectiveness has nothing to do with making a profit. Picture yourself walking by your manager's office and observing your boss reading a book on leadership. Would your response be, "Why doesn't he (or she) get to work? What a waste of time. Doesn't he (or she) already know what he's doing?"

In businesses in which there are formal leadership development programs, many are still based on traditional models. Each leader attends the required two weeks of training each year, then checks off the development box on performance appraisals and succession planning forms. Often, rounds of golf and evening cocktail parties accompany the training, and leaders completing the sessions comment on how valuable the networking was. But what about the learning?

Some progressive organizations, however, have begun to put their time and resources into developing excellent leaders. These companies value training and development so much that they have put their developmental funding into a corporate account to preclude any division from using it to cut costs. Like these companies, all organizations must see leadership development as an area critical for success. Leadership development must be made a priority, or it will never follow the robust model that is necessary for mastery.

Today, an increasing number of organizations are assessing the impact of developmental activities on leader effectiveness, and a few organizations are changing the cultural meaning of leadership development and how it occurs (that is, continuous learning versus a once-a-year experience). Let's examine how these organizations are doing this, and how they combine training with ongoing coaching.

New Approaches to Learning Via Coaching

In the Medical Field. One of the most fascinating approaches to this new trend in learning can be found in the field of medicine. For many years, medical schools offered the traditional four years of medical school and two years of residency to train doctors. Now, many schools have only two years of formal classroom training to teach the basic medical concepts and to build a frame of reference for the discipline. In the third year of medical school, students are placed in a hospital, where they continue their learning under the guidance of specialized coaches, “residents”. Under the direction of these residents, medical students learn by doing. The residents not only accelerate learning for the students, but also keep their failures small and inconsequential. After graduation, the student then goes on to complete the traditional two years of residency (coaching).

In the Sports Field. Another example of the new approach to learning comes from the field of sports, but in actuality it is not so new. Think about the drafted quarterback in professional football. This is the classic coaching-mentoring relationship. Seldom does the rookie quarterback play in a real game. The quarterback takes some classroom training, and there is some textbook work. The rookie must begin by knowing the offensive plays on paper, and most of his learning comes in practice. Typically, the rookie runs the opponent’s offense as the team prepares for next week’s game. On occasion, the rookie will run the home team offense in practice to fine-tune the execution of the game plan.

A coach is responsible for helping the rookie learn, grow, and become a more effective quarterback, but there is an element of preparation that even the coach cannot supply. That element comes from the starting quarterback, who acts as a mentor to the rookie. This happens for several reasons: (1) it is expected of the starter, that is, it’s in the job description; (2) someone did it for the starter and the legacy is passed on; (3) if the starter is injured the rookie may be in the game, and the outcome of the game and the season may ultimately depend on the rookie.

In the Management Field. Finally, we have encountered several corporations in the last few years that have adopted this new trend of continuous leadership development through coaching. They have done this for several reasons: (1) traditional classroom methods were not providing the desired results as quickly as needed; (2) the accelerated work pace and hectic schedules made it difficult to spend time in classroom training; and (3) much of the new research in leadership development suggests that eighty percent of leadership development occurs on the job (Morgan, 1992), often through interactions with others, such as a coach or mentor. These corporations did not throw away traditional learning methods—instead, they supplemented them with one-on-one executive coaching over a period of six months to a year, depending on the specific developmental needs of the leader. With this combination, many were able to demonstrate measurable results in terms of lasting skill-knowledge development and progress in leadership interactions.

The leadership development model that follows describes the key components required for implementing a robust system that utilizes coaching as a core process. It allows organizations to move from “learning-as-an-event” to *learning as a continuous improvement process* and part of the fabric of organization life.

A Robust Coaching Model for Leadership Development

The critical success factor of any leadership development model is a commitment to learning on the part of the leader. However, there are many obstacles to achieving this commitment. So before we examine the model, let’s review why personal commitment to learning sometimes fails:

- The person believes there is no room for a new priority and might say, “My plate is full and I just don’t have the time for one more task.”
- The person is working on the wrong issue, sometimes even on symptoms of a larger issue, so efforts to improve seem futile and are soon abandoned.
- The person is working on something because he or she thinks it *should* be done, rather than because he or she desires to make the change and believes it will return positive benefits.
- The person chooses a developmental goal that is too ambitious; progress is difficult and efforts to change are abandoned.

- The person does not have a good structure or process for making the change.
- The person does not accept personal accountability for making the change.
- The person takes a “hit-and-miss” approach rather than consistent action.
- The person is unable to measure progress and, therefore, is unable to celebrate small victories, becomes frustrated, and abandons the developmental effort.

The more robust leadership development model we recommend can positively impact several of the above lapses and failures. Organizational interventions or different personal approaches can impact others. We will suggest some possibilities for each of these areas in the rest of this chapter.

Coaching Model for Leadership Development

Our coaching model for leadership development, shown in Figure 19.1, is modeled on the cycle of continuous improvement. The coach is available to assist the leader through the process steps, but once the leader has grasped and ingrained it as a natural ability for continuous learning, the coach will gently exit and the leader will take full responsibility for his or her development. There may be times when the coach re-enters for specific learning situations or to provide encouragement, but the goal is to have the leader operate independently of the coach.

The coach can be an external source or someone internal to the organization who has the proper experience and training to be a coach. In either case, the coach must be someone whom the leader can trust to work with him or her over the long term.

Examining the Model Phases

As illustrated in Figure 19.1, our coaching model for leadership development has four major phases.

Assessment. It begins with an *assessment* of leadership skills. This can be accomplished through a variety of means: traditional assessment center;

FIGURE 19.1. THE COACHING MODEL FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT



360° feedback; the coach conducting interviews and providing feedback; or any other method that results in quantitative and qualitative data that the leader can use to select developmental areas on which to focus. The idea here is to set a base, or benchmark, of current leadership competency that can be measured to determine progress. Regardless of the method used, the coach is involved in debriefing the assessment data with the leader and assisting him or her in identifying developmental areas.

Developmental Plan. The next phase is the creation of a *developmental plan* or contract. Here two things are critical. First, the leader selects only *one or two high-impact areas* on which to focus. This enables him or her to have a better chance of achieving the developmental goals given the hectic work schedules of many leaders. Second, the leader is free to choose the goal. We call this *volition*. If one does not desire or choose to deal with a goal, the probability is lower that there will be any sustained effort over time. A mindset of “I don’t want to do this, but I suppose I must since everyone is saying that I must” is generally a killer to goal attainment. One will unconsciously sabotage the effort or, at a minimum, will engage in avoidance behavior.

Here’s the tough side of goal choice. Some leaders receive feedback regarding an area of leadership that, while not desirable, must be dealt with. For example, suppose a leader receives feedback that he or she “shot

the messenger” when being given bad news or critical feedback. This is an area that many leaders would avoid, because it’s not fun or easy to deal with. At the same time, reasonable people know it’s important that others feel safe, not threatened, in being the bearer of bad news. Even though this “bad” news could prevent failure, embarrassment, and needless wasted effort, it’s still not fun or desirable to deal with it.

In such a case, the leader must identify the personal benefits dealing with the issue. In the above example, a leader might increase commitment by focusing on the importance of early warning. In the execution of a business plan, the ability to adjust quickly certainly enhances the chances of success. The coach assists the leader through this process, applying a mixture of support, validation, and “tough love,” to help the leader identify development areas that will make an impact and around which the leader has some passion and energy.

Public Announcement. The third phase is the *public announcement*. The literature describes this as “publicness” or the degree to which others are aware of the leader’s goal. Most people have a need to be viewed by others as consistent in their words and actions. If one does not tell anyone else about a planned goal, then it is relatively easy to release the goal. However, if others know of the goal it is more difficult to back away from, because one would risk appearing inconsistent and irrational to others.

There may be some developmental goals that should be kept personal (for example, issues around integrity, ethics, honesty, or respect for others), but most developmental goals should be made public to those who observe and interact with the leader frequently. Making the goals public offers two benefits to the leader. First, it raises his or her commitment to the announced course of action. Second, it lays a foundation for periodic follow-up conversations with the observers to assess progress on the goal. The coach will assist the leader in planning how to make the “public announcement,” but in most cases it will be through informal one-on-one conversations tacked onto the end of other business agendas. An example might be: “Do you have a minute to talk? I wanted to thank you for providing me with feedback on my leadership skills and let you know that I have identified two areas to work on. . . . This is what I’m thinking of doing. . . . Do you have other suggestions for me?”

Implementation. Next comes the *implementation* step, which is comprised of *developmental activities* and *informal follow-up* with feedback participants. Implementation is customized to match the identified developmental areas. It may include attending classroom training, but the majority of it will be improvements in on-the-job interactions with other employees. The coach is available to meet with the leader face-to-face as needed—often in regularly scheduled monthly conversations. In addition to support, encouragement, and occasional prodding, the coach may take on the role of tutor and provide tools and tips to help the leader progress on developmental goals. The coach will also follow up with e-mail messages, phone calls, and other supporting mechanisms to help keep the leader focused on integrating development into his or her everyday thinking. In this way, it slowly becomes second nature, and a culture of continuous leadership development begins to permeate the organization.

Follow-up with feedback participants is also part of the implementation phase. We recommend that this be done every sixty days or so, and that it be an informal conversation—much like the public announcement. A sample conversation might be: “Do you have a minute to talk? I wanted to follow up with you on my leadership development. As you know, I’m working on the two areas of. . . Have you noticed any progress in these areas? Do you have any other suggestions for me to improve in this area? Thanks for your feedback. I know I’m not perfect, but I really do want to continue to work on these two areas to improve my leadership skills.” By having these quick follow-up conversations, the leader is keeping the issue alive and communicating to people that he or she is trying to improve. This helps create the impression in peoples’ minds that this leader is serious about leadership development.

Then finally, the leader begins the cycle again with another *assessment*. Here the leader can either repeat the same assessment process he or she used at the beginning or do a mini-assessment focusing only on the developmental areas on which they have been working. The coach will assist them in determining the best approach and the best time in which to complete the assessment. In general, people need to see a leader working on developmental areas for at least six months before they are willing to

say the leader has improved, but in some cases this period of time can be shorter or longer. Regardless of the length or timing of the assessment, the results should be reviewed carefully. There should be a time of *celebration* for areas in which the leader has achieved some successes. There should also be a reintegration of some of the areas into the leader's *updated development plan*. Development does not stop just because the leader improved in a few areas. The coach must encourage the leader to identify new areas to work on and also must encourage him or her to proceed on the journey of continuous leadership learning.

The Benefits of Coaching

The coaching aspect of the above model has many benefits. These are as follows:

- *Coaching allows learning to be tailored to the leader.* The classic training model holds time constant and has varied learning. That is, every person goes through the same structured experiences that last for the same amounts of time and happen at the same intervals. A learning model (such as the coaching process), on the other hand, holds learning constant and varies the time. A leader acquires some particular competence, even though more time may be required for some leaders than for others. Additionally, the competence that is appropriate for one leader may not be appropriate for another leader.
- *Coaching allows the methods to be varied according to the needs of the leader.* The classic training model provides the same experiences for everyone. A learning model can vary the methods and experiences depending on the leader and his or her needs.
- *Coaching allows the teacher/mentor to be tailored to the learner.* In the classic training model, one instructor/facilitator handles the needs of all student leaders. Typically, the instructor handles the instruction process based on what he or she does best, not what is the best learning method for the student. In a learning model, one can tune the coach/mentor/consultant to the needs of the student, much like a patient would use medical consultants depending on the nature of an illness.

Organizational Interventions to Support Leadership Development

It is not only the relationship between the individual leader and coach that makes leadership development successful. Several organizational interventions support the ongoing process and really make the coaching model pay off in terms of business results. The organization must see to the following:

- *Leadership Development Definitions.* The organization must formally define what constitutes leadership development, paint clear expectations, prescribe any stand-alone experiences, workshops, or seminars only as an element of a long-range development plan, and ensure that such experiences have purpose well beyond checking a “completed” box.
- *A Systems Approach.* The organization must integrate leadership development into performance and human resources systems so they make sense and paint a seamless picture. Examples include staffing and recruiting, succession planning, performance appraisal, and retention programs.
- *Accountability.* The organization must establish accountability for the continuing pursuit of developmental plans in the same sense as they do for job performance. Developmental discussions should be integrated into performance reviews and evaluations, along with job performance.
- *Continuous Learning Philosophy.* The organization must hold leaders accountable for following a pre-determined process. It is important to think about “following” the process versus “completing” the process. As in Deming’s PDCA (Plan—Do—Check—Act) process (Deming, 1982) of continuous quality improvement, one never completes it. It is a way of life; it’s how one goes about work. The organization must build a picture for leaders that leadership development is not to be viewed as another task to accomplish, but rather a different way to go about work. Learning must be seen as a life process, not a task.
- *Balance.* The organization must help leaders see that neither personal nor professional life is broken into three boxes labeled “learning,” “working,” and “playing.” Life is always all three at the same time.

- *Measurement.* The organization will require periodic mini-surveys so that leaders can assess their progress toward becoming more effective leaders. The assessment results can also be tallied confidentially to provide measurable return on investment (ROI) data for the organization to determine the payback on the leadership development system.

Concluding Thoughts

As our society delves further into the age of information technology and the speed of work and time accelerates beyond anything imagined fifty years ago, it is interesting to see how our learning needs have shifted from the collective classroom format to a cry for one-on-one coaching. Many would say that the craziness of our work schedules precludes us from attending traditional training; others theorize that with all of our technological speed—where whole days can be spent productively in the isolated parallel work universe of e-mail, voice mail, computer programs, and teleconferences—we now feel more sharply the elemental human need for face-to-face interaction. At any rate, leaders crave the personal relationships that coaches provide, because the coaching context is not only a place for competency development, but also a touchstone to be human again.

About the Contributors

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