Teams, not individuals deliver projects. As a project manager you are like the conductor of an orchestra, you must bring all aspects of the project together to produce a successful performance and result. However, what happens if the people on your project team do not have the full range of skills and expertise needed? This is where coaching plays a part.

Project managers should manage the project and avoid the temptation to complete critical path tasks. Managing projects is a full-time job; however, there is an opportunity for a project manager to coach team members. Some of the benefits of coaching your project team are:

- Makes team members clear about your expectations
- Encourages innovation and creativity
- Makes team members feel valued and supported
- Allows team members to reach their full potential
- Stretches performance and takes a person out of their comfort zone
- Motivates and energises team members

According to Tim Gallwey in The Inner Game of Tennis, 1997, “coaching is unlocking a person’s potential to maximise their own performance. It is helping them learn, rather than teaching them.”

So, what is the difference between teaching and learning?

- Teaching is showing a person how to do something
- Learning is doing it yourself to improve your performance
What Makes a Good Coach?

Often, coaching is used for improving poor performance, but it should not just be negative. Use it to re-enforce things you want your people to continue doing.

These are some of the characteristics of an effective coach:

- Good observer
- Good listener
- Patient
- Experienced with credibility
- Gives constructive feedback
- Has good emotional intelligence
- Genuine interest and intent to help
- Focusses on the coachees' needs
- Uses active questioning
- Gives honest feedback

It takes time and practice to improve your skills as a coach, but keep going, it will become easier. The rewards for the coach are the ability to achieve more through others (delegation) and increase their value to the business.

Directive Verses Non-Directive Coaching

There are two styles of coaching, directive and non-directive:

**Directive coaching** involves telling the person what they need to do and how to do it. The coach offers solutions, tools and techniques for moving forward. This is commonly used when there is an important deadline looming, during a crisis or when there is significant business risk. There is a chance that people may not feel fully committed to the solution provided by the coach.

**Non-directive coaching** is where a coach uses skilful questioning to help people find their own solutions. They help a person see their situation from different perspectives and get clarity on what they need to do. The person is encouraged to develop their skills and knowledge while carrying out the work. This is often used with high performers and self starters to encourage personal growth and development.

How to Coach

Keep conversations confidential and do not conduct coaching sessions in open working areas. Make sure the physical environment is private, comfortable and try, where possible, to vary it.

Preparation is important in coaching. Be ready for all eventualities. Review your previous session so each session is sequential. Remind yourself what actions the person has agreed to do and what your responsibility is. Make your sessions structured. As with project management, planning is the key to a good coaching session.
Decide whether your session will be directive or non-directive, and decide on what the person is going to be coached. During the session, agree on what the boundaries are for the work the person will undertake. All coaching sessions should be supported by an action plan and clear outcome, which are reasonable.

Agree the importance of coaching for them and you. Form a contract by getting them to say out loud, "yes I agree to do..." and get them to describe what it is they will do. This makes a very powerful commitment to carry out the agreed work.

Finally, set a review date when you will come back together to discuss progress.

**Giving and Receiving Feedback**

Feedback is a powerful coaching tool. Frequent, honest and relevant feedback encourages an environment of open communication with your team.

**How to give feedback:**

- Make sure you give it in a timely manner
- Base it on observed behaviours
- Make it specific and balanced
- Show a genuine intent to be helpful
- Support it with a plan of action and clear outcome

Be prepared for any reaction: gratitude, acceptance, rejection, shock or anger.

**How to receive feedback:**

- Listen carefully to the feedback
- Don't leap to your own defence
- Check your understanding of what is being said
- Ask for examples of good and bad behaviours
- Allow yourself time to digest the feedback
- Look together for a way of making things better

**What Coaching Is Not**

Coaching is not counselling, use your HR processes for this purpose. If your team member is having personal problems do not ignore them, find him or her support.

Don't use coaching as a replacement for formal skills training, continue to use formal training and re-enforce it with coaching.

Coaching is not mentoring. Mentoring is bigger than a person's current role or project, it is a vision of the future; of a person's career development. A mentor is an advisor, you take or leave their advice.
Finally…

When managing people, you need to coach them to get the best from them as individuals. Even high performers in your project team need somebody to talk to and to support them. Look for opportunities to have frequent and regular coaching conversations with individuals.

A word of warning: you can only coach people if they want to be coached. If they want to progress and you believe they have room to improve. This was conveyed succinctly by Sir John Whitmore, pioneer of coaching and leadership development when he said, “unless the leader, manager or coach believes that people possess more capability than they are currently expressing, they will not be able to help them express it. We must think of people in terms of their true potential not merely in the context of their historical performance.”

Coaching your project team, especially if they are newly formed or inexperienced, will help you deliver a successful project.

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