

Coaching in the Workplace: Why It Matters

Whenever I get the chance, I like to ask library employees to describe the work environment of their dreams. There is great commonality in what they say, no matter where they work. Consistently, they describe a work environment where:

- Tolerance consistently prevails throughout the organization.
- People are energized, cheerful, flexible, positive and knowledgeable.
- The work is balanced between the challenging and the tedious.
- Work is shared.
- Everyone shares ideas.
- People are willing to be team players.
- Everyone enjoys his job.
- Change is embraced.
- People are focused on the same, whole vision.
- They are happy to come to work.

When I ask the same people if they think this workplace state is actually possible, the response is mixed. A few believe it is. Others as strongly believe it is not possible. Most are somewhere in-between. Typically, someone will say that it depends upon the library director.

Is this kind of workplace possible? Of course it is. The director plays an important role in providing the leadership for it. However, the workplace we say we want depends on what happens, day in and day out, at the individual level. Every person in the organization is either making the workplace better or worse. There is no neutral ground. Each decision, each action or lack thereof, each behavior makes the organization more or less effective.

Here is an example of what I mean. An individual was on the verge of suing the employer. The individual claimed that management did nothing to correct the hostile work environment in his work unit. Indeed, management had failed to see the seriousness of the situation. Management was at fault in failing to notice and failing to take corrective measures. Taking no action made the situation worse. Especially for management, there is no neutral ground.

Still, the initial hostility was not between employees and management. The initial hostility was the result of behavior exhibited by individuals in the work unit toward one another. In this case, it was rooted in one person's intolerance of another's sexual orientation. The hostility began with two people and eventually spread to everyone in the unit. People on the fringes of the dispute were eventually affected, too.

The work unit environment became the antithesis of the dream workplace. People were distracted from their work by the controversy. Everyone's work was negatively affected. Productivity declined. Other work units were impacted. Resentment began to grow throughout the organization. Fortunately, management did finally take action. A crucial

part of management's remedy was to provide coaching for individuals in the unit, including for the unit's new manager, and the work unit as a whole.

The point is that the workplace environment is not simply imposed, but can be influenced for the better through an observing awareness and conscious choice. Coaching is not a substitute for managing. It is, however, an important tool for cultivating the kind of work place where people thrive and as a result serve their communities best.

What does it mean to coach?

- Essentially, coaching is the purposeful and skillful effort by one individual to help another achieve specific performance goals.
- coaching is fundamentally a commitment to teaching and reinforcing behavior that makes an organization function at its best
- By coaching, we model how we must interact with each other if we are to achieve our best individual and organizational performance.

Why is it important to coach?

Coaching improves individual and team performance, and ultimately, the effectiveness of the whole organization. An organization is effective when things get done well and easily, people, work easily together, and processes work easily. Individuals and groups of people are able to get work launched and get great results without getting bogged down in interpersonal conflict or mired in process. Self-confidence, tolerance, celebration, and good-natured humor dominate the atmosphere. New processes emerge, as they are needed. People understand that their jobs are more than completing tasks and that success for the customer means staff work together for the good of the whole library's community. In organizations like these, people learn that they can handle whatever comes along.

Who needs coaching?

Just about everyone in the organization, individual and team, benefits from coaching. This includes the library director, senior managers, middle managers and supervisors, management and work teams, emergent leaders and those who have promoted into more challenging positions.

When to think about a coach?

Coaching isn't a solution to everything, but it is a powerful tool for developing your individual and team capability. For example:

- You are a novice manager who is eager to succeed and you have a steep learning curve ahead of you.
- You are an employee in a work unit where someone's behavior has negatively affected your performance and that of coworkers.
- Your library wants to cultivate leaders to fill key positions that will become vacant due to retirements.

- Your work team can't make headway on its assignment.

Why cultivate coaching as a management strategy in your organization? Because doing so

- Develops your sensitivity to conditions that threaten your effectiveness and that of your library
- Cultivates in individuals and teams an observing attitude about what threatens individual and team performance
- Develops in managers and staff a feel for what constitutes superior performance
- Develops individual and team initiative to influence the work environment for the better by a conscious choice of action