



Condensed Commentary on “Coaching and the Art of Management”

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In which coaching is considered as the ‘Heart of the Practice of Management’

What is Management?

Follett: “Management is the art of getting things done through people.”

Koontz and O’Donnell: “Art is the most creative of all human pursuits.... Managing is the most important of all the arts. The most productive art is always based on an understanding of the science underlying it.... Science and art are not mutually exclusive, but complementary: ...mere knowledge of principles or theory will not assure successful practice.”

Reduced to its barest essentials, management is a people-based activity that focuses on producing particular results. The essential contribution that management makes is in creating and maintaining a climate that enables a group of people to generate results, achievements and accomplishments. To elaborate:

- ✓ Management is essentially an art which makes use of some underlying body of knowledge or science.
- ✓ Management’s focus is on getting something done, on accomplishing something. Managers make something happen that presumably would not happen otherwise.
- ✓ Management’s results are realized through the actions of others. The measure of a manager’s effectiveness is in the results of the group.
- ✓ Management occurs exclusively in the medium of communication, primarily speaking and listening, through meetings, telephone calls, presentations, writing, etc.

What is Coaching?

Our contention is that coaching is the essential feature of management. Like management:

- ✓ Coaching is essentially an art which makes use of some underlying body of knowledge.
- ✓ Coaching’s focus is on getting something done, on accomplishing something. Coaches make something happen that presumably would not happen otherwise.
- ✓ Coaching’s results are realized through the actions of others. The measure of a coach’s effectiveness is in the results of the group.
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The effectiveness of management flows from the kind of relationship, or partnership, that is created between managers and the people through whom the job will get done and the results will get created. The relationship between manager and managed is largely determined by the beliefs and assumptions of the prevailing culture.

In traditional organizations, the relationship between manager and managed occurs in a context defined by concepts such as authority, hierarchy, order, specialization, division of labour, job security, ownership rights, compliance, control, etc. These concepts bespeak an underlying paradigm that might best be described a ‘control and order’ paradigm. Much of what managers say and do in the work setting seems based on fundamental beliefs such as “being in charge”, “controlling others”, “implementing the boss’s orders”, “gaining and exercising control”, and “maintaining order”.

Contrast this with an alternative paradigm in which the underlying commitment of management is to empower and create—a paradigm which might be called “collaborative and enabling”. In this paradigm, core managerial beliefs would be based on involvement, collaboration, support, purpose, commitment, people development—in other words, management’s focus would be on creating and maintaining a climate that enables people in a group to get results.

This paradigm shift is nothing new: it’s been variously described as “domination versus cooperation”, “control versus commitment”, “traditional versus new paradigm”. The point is that we need to make this paradigm shift before we can re-conceptualize the role of manager as coach.

So who is a coach? A coach is someone who collaborates over time with a player/performer (individual or team) in order to enable that person to exceed prior levels of play/performance.

The Managerial Context for Coaching and the Coaching Context for Managing

Historically, management’s attempts at ‘coaching’ have been done within the confines of the old control-and-order paradigm. Few have seen the possibility of coaching as a new paradigm in and of itself, and therefore a possible breakthrough in the field. This potential breakthrough derives from the possibility of seeing the coaching relationship as something other than a “superior/subordinate” relationship.

Most of us have had the experience, in either sports or the performing arts, of working with a coach. Many have described their relationship with a valued coach as being among the most important and empowering in their lives. Why then is coaching so missing in our culture of management? We have only to consider the way one normally relates to a coach and the way one normally relates to a manager to see why.



When we go to a coach, we are generally open to learning, eager to show mistakes, and willing to try out some new approach so that the coaching can provide what is needed for improvement. We aren't normally trying to “look good” for the coach, or to convince them of how much we know or what fine performers we already are. When people relate to a traditional paradigm manager, they commonly tend to try to hide or justify mistakes, listen defensively, and work at “looking good”.

Here's the key point: when people are relating to a coach, they are committed to producing a result. In almost every field of endeavour where performance is the point, coaching is an integral part. The more outstanding the player, the more likely she/he is to have an ongoing and committed relationship with a coach. Coaches have the same commitment to the player's performance as the player has, but have a different perspective, a different relationship to the action, and a different role to play in the game.

In every arena where high performance is valued and sought after, we find players with an active, committed relationship to a coach—in every field except management. The first principle of effective coaching is that no one can be coached in the absence of a demand for it. And in the world of management, there is very little demand for either coaching or management.

Why is there no demand for coaching in management? We suggest three possible answers:

1. **Managers believe they already know how to manage.** In traditional organizations, people succeed because of what they know, or, more precisely, what they and others think they know. In coaching, knowledge is less important than the actions which generate results.
2. **Managers may actually be more committed to control, authority, order and power than they are to producing results.** Traditional organizations tend to produce compliant, political or “looking good” behaviour, rather than actions that produce results. No effective coaching can occur if the person being coached is focused on scoring points with the coach rather than on the field.
3. **Managers may not actually feel personally responsible for the poor results produced by their group.** Circumstances can often be found to explain away undesired results. And the manager's job is commonly conceived of as holding others responsible, implying that the manager is therefore not responsible.

When a manager sees himself as already knowledgeable, is oriented toward control and order, and can readily blame circumstances (including other people) for the poor group performance, there is no demand for coaching or being coached.



The Essential Coaching Relationship

The critical difference between managers and coaches is the context of their relationships: coaches and managers relate in fundamentally different ways to those people they work with.

Probably the greatest difference between the traditional context for management and that of coaching is where one locates responsibility and commitment. In traditional management, it is the manager’s job to motivate. In coaching, it is the player’s responsibility to be motivated. In management, we work constantly at having employees “buy in” to management’s initiatives. In coaching, the players bring their commitment to the coach rather than attempting to derive their commitment from the coach.

The fundamental difference lies in the paradigm being applied. The “control and order” paradigm calls for a particular kind of relationship between the manager and the managed, between “superior” and “subordinate”, between “controller” and “controlled”. In most organizations, management decides and employees implement. The core relationship is essentially impersonal and mechanistic. People are “resources” to be used, objects, entities or machines that need to be maintained (motivated), fixed (developed), and eventually upgraded (retrained) or replaced (outplaced).

Coaching, on the other hand, occurs in the personal relationship between the coach and the player/performer. The players are doers, not objects that are done to. The coach’s job is to see what the player/performer cannot see, to work in the player’s “blind spots” with the sole objective of providing whatever is needed for the player to excel beyond prior limits. The assumption is that people have limits (barriers) which may be surpassed through the mutual commitment (partnership) of both the coach and the player.

Coaching enables the player/performer to see something about their playing/performing that they do not see, and would not otherwise be able to see. And what the coach enables the player to see makes a difference in the results produced. Without coaching, a player is limited to merely honing the existing levels of play/performance. Small incremental improvements are feasible, but the level of results achievable remains constrained by the way the player/performer habitually interprets things. Coaching makes possible a reinterpreting of the same things so that a quantum shift in results can naturally occur. A good coach continuously produces these shifts in results that the player/performer could not have achieved on their own.



Essential Elements of Coaching

From our own experiences of coaching and being coached, observations of great coaches, and a scan of the literature, we’ve identified 10 essential elements of good coaching. These ten are interdependent facets of coaching: they all need to be present.

1. Partnership, mutuality, relationship
2. Commitment to producing a result and enacting a vision
3. Compassion, sense of humanity, non-judgmental acceptance, love
4. Communicating (speaking and listening) for action
5. Responsiveness to the coach’s interpretation
6. Honouring the uniqueness of each player, relationship and situation
7. Practice and preparation
8. Giving and receiving
9. “Team” sensitivity
10. Willingness to go beyond what’s already been achieved

At the heart of coaching is the coaching relationship. Together, the coach and the player/performer are committed to a partnership that is dedicated toward significant improvement in results. The player produces the result, but the level and quality of the result is generated out of the partnership with the coach. The player’s performance is modified through the communication that takes place within that partnership.

The coach is not an expert in playing—only in coaching the player. Technical expertise is not enough: the coach must have the ability to enable the player to go beyond his current level of performance. Thus a deep insight into the player, in all their uniqueness, far outweighs the mere delivery of information.

What Characterizes a Great Coach?

Great coaches generally tend to focus on what it takes to win the next game, not on past records and statistics. They expect nothing less than the best from themselves and their players. Most significant, however, is their commitment to being a certain way in their role as coaches. We’ve distilled our observations into the following set of common commitments:

1. Be clear that it’s a game, and that the game is winning the game.
2. Be ethical within the rules of the game, but not limited by them.
3. Be committed to the players and generate a personal stake in the success and wellbeing of each individual.
4. Be focused on the development of each player.



5. Be uncompromising in one’s discipline to preparation and practice.
6. Be committed to the possibility that there are never absolute limits to performance for either an individual or an organization.
7. Be in continuous communication with the players, the owners, the public and the competition.
8. Be personally responsible for the outcome, but not in a way that robs the players of their being fully responsible too.
9. Be honest, talk straight, and model the qualities that you demand from the players.
10. Be awake and aware of the big picture and what is occurring in all aspects of the game from the back office to the front lines.
11. Be uncompromising with the details every step of the way.
12. Be a teacher.
13. Be a learner, and listen acutely.
14. Be your word.
15. Be in love with the game and the privilege of being a coach.

So What is Coaching?

- ✓ Coaching is an activity that generates new possibilities for action and allows for breakthroughs in performance. It provides a player/performer or a team with the possibility of ‘seeing’ the game from a different perspective, which, in turn, creates the possibility for action not available in the absence of coaching.
- ✓ Coaching can provide managers with a way of developing themselves and others in what has customarily been explained away as the “art” of management.
- ✓ Coaching is a two-way process: being a great coach also includes being a great coachee.
- ✓ Coaching works solely through the medium of communication: coaches produce results by what they say and the quality of their listening.
- ✓ Coaching calls for a high degree of interpersonal risk and trust on the part of both the coach and the coachee. This risk exists inside a mutual commitment to the possibility of a breakthrough in performance.
- ✓ Coaching is driven by commitment, both the commitment of the coach and the commitment of the players. Coaching lives in the relationship between committed individuals who are working to accomplish something together.
- ✓ Given the prevailing paradigm, coaching is noticeably absent in most organizations; consequently, little or no attention is given to developing the skills and qualities of effective coaching in management development programs.



- ✓ Coaching calls for a re-thinking and transforming of our traditional models of managing. Coaching requires an inter-related and dynamic vision of organization based on relationship, commitment, purpose and results.

Creating an Organizational Culture of Coaching

How does one go about becoming an effective manager/coach? And what can management do to bring about the necessary paradigm shift? Nothing less than an organizational transformation is required. The following steps constitute one scenario which has proven successful.

1. **EDUCATE** people in the distinctions of effective coaching through a process of inquiring into what is currently limiting organization effectiveness and what the possibilities might be for creating new ways of relating and performing. This would necessarily include thinking about the nature of organization, communication, commitment and the underlying assumptions that shape their perception.
2. **COMMIT** to a project with a finite timeframe and an ‘impossible’ or breakthrough result to be produced. This project will be the laboratory in which the skills of effective coaching will be developed.
3. **DETERMINE** who the players in the project will be, their relationships to each other, and their relationships to their external environment (that is, “bosses”, vendors, customers, unions, community groups, etc.). Commitments and expectations should also be made explicit at this point.
4. **DECLARE** who will be the coach in each relationship and what the person being coached is committed to accomplishing.
5. **BE PREPARED** for breakdowns as the project progresses. Remember that successful coaching is always uncovering barriers to the next level of performance. Breakdowns are the raw material of breakthroughs.
6. **ALLOW** the day-to-day activities of the project to emerge in the openings (new possibilities) that naturally occur in conversation with a coach. When a breakdown does occur, avoid questioning the relationship with the coach: don’t blame yourself (“I let the coach down”) or the coach (“What they said to do didn’t work”). Either response will shift the relationship from empowerment to one of assessment.
7. **VALIDATE AND ACKNOWLEDGE** accomplishments and breakdowns alike.
8. **COMPLETE** everything as you go. Push nothing under the rug, and keep looking forward, no matter what. At the end of the project, tell the truth about whether or not you accomplished what you set out to do, and chose to renew or revoke the commitment.



Revising Our Thinking About Management

We see coaching as a profound challenge to our customary ways of thinking about management. The coaching relationship presents us with the possibility of extraordinary increases in managerial effectiveness, but at a price. And the price is that we will have to give up some of our habitual ways of thinking about management. What’s involved is a shift from a traditional paradigm concerned with hierarchical authority, order and control to a paradigm based on partnership for achieving results and commitment to collaborating in accomplishing new possibilities.

Coaching isn’t “new”. It is actually a much older way of being and relating than managing. Neither is it “the answer”. It is rather a breakthrough in the ongoing commitment to the art of the possible in management. We believe that coaching captures the essence of the art of management in a way which enables people to shift their thinking from a traditional paradigm of control and order to a paradigm designed for empowering and enabling people in action. We see coaching as the new context for management. We also see coaching as the beginning of a true partnership between managers and employees that can accomplish more than could have been imagined from within the constraints of the traditional paradigm.