

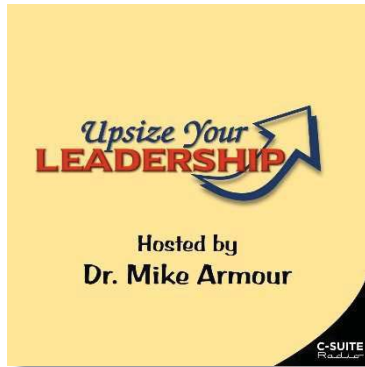
Develop a Coaching Culture

Why Companies Today Expect Leaders to Coach

Hosted by Dr. Mike Armour

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This week I'm teaching a multi-day course on coaching skills for leaders and managers. The participants are about 20 senior executives from an international company which has recently announced an initiative to create a corporate culture built heavily around coaching.

More and more companies are taking similar steps. I have been talking about this emerging trend for more than a decade. I discussed it, for instance, in a lengthy interview in 2010 which was later published in an anthology of articles on leadership and coaching.

In today's podcast I want to revisit some observations which I made in that interview. Time has proven that the trends which I forecasted in 2010 have pretty much played out as I predicted. And this week's training is further proof of it.

I hope you'll join me for the next few minutes as we examine the importance today of being a leader who coaches. Developing your coaching capabilities is a sure-fire way to Upsize Your Leadership.

I can remember a day, not that long ago, when virtually no school of business had a course on coaching. Today schools all over the country offer graduate degrees in coaching. And the topic of coaching is increasingly prominent in MBA programs.

I've watched that trend develop with more than mere passing interest. Shortly after I launched my leadership development firm in 2001, a major university asked me to develop a course on coaching skills for managers to be offered as an elective in their Executive MBA program. For the next few years I taught that course repeatedly in both Dallas and Houston.

With coaching becoming such a popular topic in schools of business, it's no wonder that coaching has become a priority in many organizations, both profit and non-profit.

Today companies are increasingly explicit about their coaching and mentoring expectations for management. I'm approached regularly by executives who want to develop internal mentoring and coaching programs in their company, something that few thought about 15 or 20 years ago.

This mounting interest became evident to me when I was teaching that EMBA class on coaching skills for managers. Even though my course was an elective, it quickly filled up every semester. It always maxed out the space to which the class was assigned. Just a few years before, a course like this would not have even been offered. And had it existed, it would not drawn nearly such intense interest.

So, what brought about the fascination with coaching? Several factors can be cited. One is the expanding emphasis on team-building. In today's hypercompetitive market place, perceptive leaders know that to be winners themselves, they must surround themselves with a winning team. And for the team to win, leaders must develop and utilize the full potential of every team member. As a result, leaders increasingly picture themselves as player-coaches on a winning team.

Then there's the fact that in most companies the single greatest asset today is the people. This is true wherever you have a knowledge-based economy. Historically we have defined investment in infrastructure along physical lines – upgraded facilities, new communication systems, expanded data centers, etc. But for companies which thrive in a knowledge-based economy, their most important infrastructure investment is in people. Coaching them to develop their expertise and enhance their performance is part of this investment.

Of course, companies have always needed to develop their people. Why then this relatively new expectation that leaders should be directly involved in coaching and mentoring?

This development is simply another step in the natural evolution of coaching itself. In the first stage of the evolution, dating back to the early 1990s when I took on my first coaching engagements, companies used executive coaches in large measure to rescue managers with struggling careers. By its very nature, this kind of coaching was remedial.

And I might add, it was often not a lot of fun. Many companies used the option of bringing in a coach as a last ditch effort to rescue a manager whose career was in a downward spiral. As this practice became more common, managers were understandably suspect whenever they were assigned a coach. They took it to mean that their job was on the line, even if it was not. They therefore took a defensive posture toward the coach from the outset. Sometimes it took several weeks to break through that defensiveness and establish the kind of trust on which coaching success depends.

Today relatively few coaching engagements are remedial in nature. And the rare ones which are in fact remedial are taken earlier than in the past, not at the point where coaching is an option of last resort.

Shortly after the turn of the century, a second stage in the evolution of coaching occurred. It centered on what we today call developmental coaching. Companies began providing coaches for solid performers – the so-called high-potential players – who were ready to step up their game. Developmental coaching proved so successful that it quickly became a widespread practice.

Then, as more and more executives benefited from coaching firsthand, they became intrigued with the idea of generalizing the benefit across the entire organization. But the potential cost of giving every manager an external coach was problematic, if not prohibitive. Leaders therefore began to ask, "Why do we have to rely entirely on outside professionals to coach our people? Why can't we be coaches and mentors ourselves?"

This question launched the third stage in the evolution of corporate coaching. In this stage the coaching emphasis remains developmental. But now coaching is no longer the sole province of outside specialists. It's also the province of leadership across the entire organization. Today corporate initiatives are underway everywhere to equip leaders and managers with coaching capabilities.

In developing an internal coaching culture, the first step is to create a cadre of effective leader-coaches, especially at upper levels of the organization. A coaching culture will never take root unless top management supports it openly and demonstrates its support through active, personal involvement as coaches and mentors. The goal is to keep growing this cadre until coaching and mentoring skills are broadly diffused in the organization. At this point a coaching culture begins to unfold.

This culture will give rise to two types of coaching and mentoring conversations. Some will be formal, where a specific coach is paired with a specific employee for a structured, multi-week series of meetings. Others will be ad hoc, with managers and supervisors using coaching and mentoring techniques in their day-to-day interaction with direct reports.

I've helped companies set up both types of programs. The first type – the one where a coach and a worker are paired to work together for several weeks – is normally undertaken only by companies with a large cadre of employees. I've helped create them in Fortune 100 companies, all the way down to companies with 1500 workers. For companies smaller than that, ad hoc, day-to-day coaching is more the norm. That's the kind of coaching training which I'm undertaking this week.

For companies like this, where coaching is part of the on-going interaction between managers and their direct reports, coaching becomes more of a mindset than a set program. Instead of taking highly directive approaches with their team members, managers begin to approach problem-solving in the team with a coaching approach.

What does that mean? It basically means that managers start to view themselves as facilitators who are developing their people's self-reliance. Dialogue between the manager and worker is structured to force frequent reflection and introspection on the part of the person being coached. This is done primarily by asking artfully-designed questions which lead the worker down a path of self-discovery. Coaching leaders put more emphasis on asking the right question at the right time than they do on providing the answer or the solution to issues brought to them by their team.

When manager-coaches promote introspection on the part of those whom they coach, it serves to strengthen that person's inner resources and to make these resources accessible at will. It also engenders deeper self-understanding and a clearer set of perspectives. Most of all, it enlarges the ability to autonomously generate appropriate insights, options, goals, strategies, and outlooks essential to sustained success.

I'm often asked, however, whether busy managers really have time to coach their people. There are so many other things demanding their time. I answer by asking this. Do these managers have time for conversations with people in their organization? After all, as leaders they're responsible for developing their people, aren't they? And don't they pursue this development in large part through conversation? Now, what if they were skilled at turning these developmental conversations into brief coaching encounters?

You see, coaching is not so much about how much time you spend with people, but about the way you structure conversations with them. Coaching conversations don't need to be time-consuming. I've had coaching conversations which ran for hours and others which lasted only a few minutes.

And since this podcast is primarily about leadership, let me conclude today by saying that there is something of a natural affinity between leadership and coaching. Above everything else, leadership is a "people process." It's about rallying people around a common purpose, then motivating them and mobilizing them to achieve it. Only by achieving desired results does leadership fulfill its calling.

Coaching has this same passion for results. It seeks to improve effectiveness, accelerate achievement, and attain vital outcomes, all primary concerns for leadership.

Leaders who coach are fulfilling the third of three imperatives incumbent on leadership. The first is to know your people well. The second is to know where you are taking them. And the third is to equip them for the journey. Coaching equips people for the journey. Unlike counseling and therapy, which are called "people-helping" professions, coaching and mentoring are best described as "people-equipping."

If you are a leader or manager who sees the value in coaching your people, but it's an entirely new endeavor for you, I have one parting bit of advice. In the words of Nike, "Just do it.!" You did not learn to lead by reading a book or going to seminars. You learned to lead by doing it. The same is true of coaching. Read books on the subject, to be sure. Go to workshops on coaching, if possible. Check out online training for managers and leaders who want to coach. But the only way that you will ever become a coaching leader, in the truest sense of the term, is to do it.

Dr. Mike Armour is the managing principal of Strategic Leadership Development International, which he founded in Dallas in 2001. Learn more about his leadership development services at www.LeaderPerfect.com.

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