



Manager as Coach: Using a Coach Approach in Performance Evaluations

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A coaching approach can create a “win” for everyone, lightening the load of managers and increasing the engagement of employees.

Frequently in our Empowerment Coaching Training workshops we are asked questions related to how a coaching approach could help a person to be a more effective manager. How can managers use questions to improve their relationships with their subordinates, empower the employees under their care, increase engagement and create a better sense of community?

Each question a leader asks can lead to empowerment or disempowerment. We’ve all experienced disempowering questions before. Disempowering questions are questions that cause reactions rather than creation. “What did you do that for?” “What were you thinking?” “Now what are we going to do?”

Empowering questions get people to think and allow them to discover their own answers, and take full responsibility for the results. You’ll find some examples in the next section. Eventually this kind of approach will decrease the need for employees to ask questions about every little decision with which they are faced. It will lighten the load of managers and increase the engagement of the employee.

Space will not allow for a full discussion here, but I would like to address the specific application of coaching to the performance appraisal process. How can questions effectively be used in conducting performance appraisals? I am heavily indebted to the work of Michael Marquardt, *Leading With Questions*, p. 115-131, though I prefer a less directive coaching approach than he presents in some situations.

Questions during performance evaluations

Imagine yourself using some of the following questions during a performance evaluation if you’re a manager, or imagine yourself being asked these kinds of questions if you’re an employee? How would this experience be better, or worse, than the kind of performance evaluations you’ve received in the past?

- What was your main goal this year? What did you do to reach that goal? Describe the gap or the forward progress between your goal and your performance.
- If there was a gap, what do you think caused the gap? If there was forward progress, what were the factors that led you to that progress?
- To close a gap or preserve a positive difference:
 - What will you keep doing?
 - What will you keep doing but do it differently?
 - What will you start doing?
 - What will you stop doing?
- In what ways does your work contribute to our success?
- How could you make your job more effective?
- What gets in the way of doing your job?
- What does our leadership team do that gets in the way of your job?
- How could we communicate management decisions more effectively?
- If you could change one thing about the organization, what would it be?

- What's a potential benefit that we could offer that would increase your level of engagement?
- What is it like to work on a team in our organization?
- What makes you proud to work for this organization?
- What's something valuable you've learned in the past month?
- What brings you joy in your work?
- What gives your life meaning?
- What questions should I have asked you?
- What else would you like to talk about today?

Giving Feedback

How can a coaching approach be used by managers when giving "constructive" feedback after a performance evaluation?

Michael Marquardt, "*Leading with Questions*," suggests the following approach.

By the nature of the performance appraisal process, many leaders may feel compelled to give what they fondly think of as "constructive" feedback rather than ask positive questions. If constructive feedback is needed, the best approach is to ask people what they think should be worked on. In most situations, employees are very aware of their shortcomings. When those areas are enumerated by the employee, they can suggest working on the one or two they think would be most beneficial to improve upon. This keeps you in the realm of coaching, not judging.

When giving feedback there are some basic rules, and the first one is that people should first give their own corrective feedback. Usually they are then quite open and critical. Then when you are giving your corrective feedback, you should do it using questions like: "What could have made your performance even more optimal? What ways do you see to improve your performance? What things would you do differently if you could start the project again?"

People themselves should seek to gain insights relative to their strengths and weaknesses. It is better that they understand them first: they should tell them to you and not vice versa, as is usually the case. *Leading With Questions*, p. 128

Coaching Feedback Questions

- I'm curious to hear what thought process led you to do it this way. What values or beliefs led you to approach it in this way?
- Say more about what led you to that conclusion. Do you see any other ways to do this?
- What have you learned in this process thus far?
- How would you describe the problem we are facing?
- How would you describe the best possible solution in this situation?
- Knowing the values and goals of this organization, what steps do you think would most likely lead to the best solution?
- Where do you think we can find the most agreement?
- In the areas where we differ, what would you suggest as the best solution?
- What role would you like to play in the solution?
- What role would you like me to play in the solution?
- (add your own questions)

In our Empowerment Coaching Training sessions I usually teach the skill of asking open ended questions. I jokingly suggest that if you can add the words, "you idiot" to the end of any question, you should probably reword the question. As you read through the questions above, which of these would you like to be asked? Which questions might make you feel uncomfortable? What questions would you add to this list?

Encouraging people to ask and respond to questions

Let's be honest, the cultures of many organizations are not necessarily conducive to a coaching approach. In organizations governed by fear and duty, certain types of questions are off-limits and leaders are too afraid of losing control to ask open ended questions, much less to answer questions from employees. Some employees may be reluctant or uncomfortable answering questions if this is a new practice. What would create that kind of reluctance? Employees may doubt whether you are truly interested in what they think. They may fear that their answers will be "wrong." They might hesitate to answer for fear of appearing foolish or giving an unacceptable answer. In short, they don't trust you.

Marquardt cites Marshall Goldsmith (*Coaching for Leadership*, 2000), who suggests the following approach in getting employees to open up.

Goldsmith suggests that the leader or manager have a conversation built around six discussion points, starting each conversation by describing them so that the other person doesn't feel set up or trapped in a game of "guess what the leader wants." Leaders should be careful to consider the impact of each question.

1. *Where are we going?* I will tell you where I think we're going; you tell me where you think we're going.
2. *Where are you going?* I'll tell you where I see you going; you tell me where you see yourself going.
3. *What are you doing well?* I'll give you my sense of what you're doing well; you give me your sense of what you're doing well.
4. *What suggestions for improvement do you have for yourself?* I'll tell you what suggestions I have; you tell me what suggestions you have.
5. *How can I help you?* I'll add anything else I think I can do; you tell me what I can do to help and support you.
6. *What suggestions do you have for me?* I'll tell you what I think I need to do; you tell me what you think I need to do. (*Leading With Questions*, p. 129-130)

What value do you see in "leading with questions?" What kind of results do you think the types of questions used above would have? Marquardt suggests that "enabling and equipping people to become reflective practitioners will help them become better leaders." (p. 131). How do questions create more reflective practitioners?

What kind of action steps would you like to take to apply what you have learned by reading this article?

I'd be interested to hear your responses to what you've read here. Contact me at timlifecoach@gmail.com