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COACHING A Critical Business Skill For Our Time

By Dan Denehy, *President*, DENEHY Club Thinking Partners

These days it seems many in leadership positions discuss Leadership and Management at length. There is a belief that there is a progression from Management to Leadership and that it is a linear process. This leadership topic is time tested as evidenced by the Harvard Business Review Classic, "Managers and Leaders: Are They Different?" First published in May 1977 and again in March 1992, it was for many years the most reprinted of all HBR articles. Many reading this did not drive when the article was first published. Yet, the article is a must-read for any management student and to a very large degree is time tested. In short, it contends that managers and leaders are very different people, and each skill set are also very different.

An excellent manager tends to be exceptional at process; getting the trains to run on time, checks the boxes, encouraging while holding people accountable. The definition of excellent leadership has evolved since 1977 but is identified by several principles viewed as best practices: fueling creative thinking, colorfully defining aspirational and reasonable short and long term goals, acquiring and shaping people in a dynamic environment where change is not only inevitable but welcome. Especially today, this is an incredibly powerful concept, especially given the legacy thinking that has shackled many in our industry.

Peter Drucker, the best management guru of all time, contends that the best management style is a Contingent Management Style. That on a continuum, the best of the best can migrate, with transparency, between a command and control approach to that of a consensus builder, leveraging group thinking and considering different and varied opinions while efficiently reaching a goal. The best managers do this being situationally aware: knowing when to apply that range of approaches with a deft hand. Note: there are many stops on the continuum along the way between each of those approaches. To be good at it, one needs to be among a myriad of things - extremely self-aware with terrific peripheral vision and a high EQ.

Now with these basics out of the way, my contention is this: Both managers and leaders need to be great at coaching. In part because it is not only an incredibly powerful executive skill, it is a humanistic people skill, which at their core are what leadership and management are all about.

A hallmark of great leadership is helping others work through their problems. It is a powerful tool and gratifying as well. Now, more than ever, it takes time and energy. Some may have one or both. Beyond the quantitative element of "keeping employees on the payroll," nurturing talent now may have an equally impactful value in staff retention, commitment, loyalty, and business performance long term. **Nurture talent now.**

Excellent coaching is a skill that should be found throughout your organization, not only when one goes to the therapist! The best coaching moments are frequently spontaneous, in the moment, earned with little planning and when done well can result in an aha! moment.

Coaching has three fundamental elements.

One

When found in in a potential coaching moment, get yourself in **the right headspace**. If you are in the “fix the problem, move to the next one,” mindset you might miss the opportunity to coach. Paramount, and here is a key difference: listen to understand vs. listen to solve or give the right answer. If it is important for you to be the smartest person in the room, use this powerful skill. Trust that the second smartest person in the room is using this skill as well. When listening to understand you will hear more. Active listening is critical in problem solving. Yet listening for words, texture and emotion is graphically more insightful. When you find yourself approaching a coachable moment, or a planned coaching event, prep yourself to be an active listener. Genuine curiosity is an incredibly powerful tool. Peripheral vision, delivery, tone, body language, even the setting for the conversation is very telling.

Two

Get beyond surface level problems to **find the root cause**. This can be difficult, especially in the moment. Probe, and then probe to the level below. How do you do this? The power of the question. A few key points: Open ended questions are much more powerful than a binary question – yes and no, black or white. Layered, inquisitive questions that do not come across as an interrogation are the best approach. Don't be afraid to go a little Dr. Phil and ask “How did that make you feel?” about the issue. You might be surprised how the floodgates open. Seek to understand.

Three

Now the hard part. The dialog should allow you to focus on questions, or posing options that **cause good thinking, problem solving** and if you are good at coaching, resolution or at least a path toward a resolution. It is ok to lead the witness here to some degree. Pose options that they may not have considered given they may have a certain skill or experience gap or an EQ blind spot. Trust we all have them. If you get frustrated, take a deep breath. We all know how the mouse eats the elephant. One bite at a time.

Problems are frequently people related. While the issue might be with technology, communications, process, **the root cause is more likely with people**. For example, what if a situation calls for someone to do complex functions with excel, and you did not know they struggle with math, yet they are a committed, hardworking employee. Humanistically diagnosing this personal challenge is great, but then not mandating a solution, but rather collectively coming to a solution is much more powerful. The aha moment.

Focusing on the people, the who, not the work, or the process is a very powerful approach. It is important when coaching to be ok when whomever you are coaching gets to a good but not great solution or gets there in a different way than you may have considered.

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Dan grew up in the hospitality business and applies a balanced, humanistic management style coupled with an analytic approach to a club or resort's needs, assessments and resulting solutions.

Dan's background includes senior management experience with the Walt Disney Company, the five-star, five-diamond Boca Raton Resort and Club and several private member clubs. Dan has conducted more than **750+ search** and consulting projects in the private club and resort business.

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