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Leading in Tough Times: 7 Key Skills to Go From Managing to Coaching

By Dr. Rick Kirschner



As the economy heads deeper into a rough patch, companies must work harder than ever to meet financial targets. That means the pressure on managers to meet operational and financial goals is more intense than ever.

I believe that a big part of producing business results consists of supporting and coaching, as well as managing your people.

Developing and strengthening coaching skills becomes essential to leveraging your competitive edge as a manager, or you're bound to get left behind.

Here are seven skills to hone as you move from manager to coach to produce successful results.

Skill 1: Listening to Understand

The most common stumbling block for managers is the idea that management and coaching are about *talking*. That somehow talking takes priority over listening to understand. And I can see how this happens.

In fast-paced environments, it's a natural tendency to put the pedal to the metal, to try harder, move faster, do more. The problem is that managers wind up talking 'at' their people instead of 'with' them and 'to' them. A lack of understanding means that without knowing what motivates your people, you can't engage them where it counts.

When you understand what motivates your people—and it's different for different people—you can speak with authority that is recognized as authority. You can do so because your authority is now relevant and conveys experience and knowledge.

Skill 2: Confidence Builds Confidence

Then there's the confidence problem. When managers come off as tentative, hesitant or uncertain, it tends to evoke these same responses in their teams. This problem is the side effect of at least two missing pieces: first, not knowing your own motivation, and second, not being prepared to speak when you need to speak. The fact is, people want to be led, not managed, and they need to get that sense of authority from you, because it gives them confidence to do what needs to be done.

Your people believe it when you believe it.

Now, it's a legitimate question, confidence in what? After all, in these turbulent times, nobody really knows what's coming next. And some degree of introspection is prudent for anyone wanting to thrive instead of merely survive. However:

*** You can have confidence in your motivations.**

*** You can have confidence in what you do know.**

*** You can have confidence that under the right conditions, people will want to give you their best, to do their best.**

Skill 3: Blending

Blending is the foundation of all successful relationships. It happens whenever you reduce the differences between yourself and another person. It happens whenever you send signals of similarity and commonality. And a failure to blend is the cause of most conflict. Nobody cooperates with anyone who seems to be against them. If perception is everything in relationships, then sending blending signals is how you create the perception of partnering with your people during the course of a process or a project.

Blending changes everything. It tells your people that you are with them instead of against them. And it increases the likelihood of cooperation instead of conflict.

Skill 4: Coaches Ask (Good) Questions

When it comes to asking questions, I believe it was the stoic philosopher, Epictetus, who said "*We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak.*" Maybe this is the apt metaphor for the way we're built, but I've observed that too many managers just don't get it. Although they certainly think they do. Ask just about anyone if they're a good listener, and they'll tell you yes. But most people do a meager job of it at best, instead drawing conclusions and then making statements instead of engaging people by asking questions.

Maybe the managers who don't ask very many questions are afraid of looking stupid. Maybe they think it makes them seem weak. Or maybe they think they're supposed to have all the answers. Maybe it's just a function of the fact that we can think faster, at 500 words a minute, than most people talk, which is about 130 words a minute. So it's pretty easy to get ahead of what we're hearing, or for our minds to wander to what we want to say when it's our turn to talk.

But a great coach or manager understands the limits of his or her knowledge about another person, and explores that boundary to build the connection, rather than building the boundary and weakening the relationship. The key is curiosity. The less you think you know, the more you find out. The more value you place on what you can learn by listening, the less distracted you'll be with your own thoughts.

Perhaps you've heard it said that '*there is no such thing as a stupid question.*' That's a great guide when it comes to everyone other than you! As an effective manager/coach, you can't afford to ask dumb questions if you want to bring out the best in your people.

When someone asks me a question, no matter how trite, simplistic or off the point, I welcome it and find the opportunity in it. But when it's me (or you in your role of coach) asking, I think that there are dumb questions. Questions are dumb if they fail to take into account things people have said. They're dumb if they're closed ended instead of open ended, unless you intend to bring something to a close.

*** You want your questions to serve an intelligent purpose.**

*** You want to get to the deep structure of a person's motivations and positions.**

*** You want to learn about their goals and aspirations, their desires and fears.**

Asking questions is a great way of leading people to their own resourcefulness. And I want my questions to inform, just as their answers will inform me. As a coach, the more you know, the more likely it is that you will know exactly what you need to know in order to elicit comfort, confidence and credibility from your employees.

And it sets a great example for employees, too, because the best people talk about their customers' and clients' business rather than talking about their own issues, and that's only possible when they've been asking good questions.

Skill 5: The Power Of Persuasion

Persuasion is the deliberate attempt to influence another person's attitude in order to change their behavior. Once you've paid some attention, listened well and learned about what motivates your people, using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Model, or any other motivation model that appeals to you, it is important that you use what you've learned to speak to the motivations of your people. You want to speak in a way that moves them, engages them and connects them to a desirable future while offering them protection from an undesirable one.

This has to do with what you say, and also how you say it. The fact is that most people are listening emotionally most the time, and listening logically only rarely. So, no matter how logical you are in what you propose they do, you have to send signals that help your people feel that they should let themselves be influenced by you. Otherwise, you may be wasting both their time and yours.

Skill 6: Sending Signals

There are known ways to package what you say when coaching your employees for maximum impact. I call these packaging tools 'signals,' 'guides' and 'themes.'

* **Signals** speak to how you address the emotions.

* **Guides** make it easier for others to understand the logic of what you say.

* **Themes** are a way of structuring what you say to help you stay on track while saying it.

The more you use this kind of approach, the more successful you will be in getting a sustainable result.

Skill 7: Increasing Commitment

Almost nobody goes to work wanting to do a bad job. Most people want to do well, and want what they do to matter. So it seems to me that teamwork happens when leadership happens, and leadership begins with you knowing the answers to three very important questions.

1. ***What are we doing?***
2. ***Why are we doing it?***
3. ***Why does it matter?***

Once you have the answers to these questions firmly fixed in your mind, you can help your employees to find their own answers to these questions and then keep those answers in front of them as a reminder of meaning and purpose.

Of course, it's one thing to have a lofty vision, and something else entirely when it comes to the rubber meeting the road. As you strive to move from managing to coaching, and to keep your people connected and focused, you simply must treat them with respect. Keep them informed along the way. Give recognition whenever it's due, and not just in the large things but in the small things as well. A good coach makes it a point to say:

* *Thanks for showing up.*

* *Thanks for speaking up.*

* *Thanks for standing up.*

* *Thanks for keeping your promise.*

* *Thanks for following through.*

My mom used to tell me that there is always something to appreciate, you just have to appreciate the value of appreciation to find it.

Bonus Skill: Dealing with Bad Behavior

Despite your best efforts at managing and coaching your employees, some people will behave badly in the workplace. Most of us can agree that what's bad about bad behavior is the bad effect it has on morale, teamwork and getting results. There's no getting around the fact that pushy, negative, disruptive and unreliable behavior is costly because it has real world consequences.

But I think it's important to keep in mind that behavior is purposeful. People do what they do for what they consider a good reason, and labeling a particular behavior as good or bad may do little to influence whether you get more or less of it. More important, I think, is to understand what's behind it for them. Then, using your understanding of their good intent as a reference point, you can help your people understand that the consequences of their behavior are self-defeating to their good intentions. Done persuasively, they'll be grateful for the insight and opportunity to learn. And you, as a result, will get better results.

So what specifically do you do when there's a problem with someone's behavior?

1. First, **observe it**. Notice what is happening, when it happens, where it happens and how it happens.

2. Then get together with the person or people involved, and **learn everything you can about it from them.**
3. Set the stage by **telling them what you've observed**, where and when you observed it, and then ask them, *"When this happens, what's going on for you? What is your intention?"*
4. Next, **tell them the self-defeating part.** *"When you do that, here's the reaction it gets. Is that what you intended?"* And the answer is almost always going to be *"No, it's not!"* That's your learning moment, right there. *"What do you think might work better?"*

Give your employee a chance to come up with a new choice, or, if they're drawing a blank, either brainstorm with them, or tell them what you know could work better. In any case, you'll have set the table for learning. A little reinforcement, and it becomes their skill for life.

Conclusion:

It is the nature of life, and business, especially in these tough times, that change is inevitable and irreversible. As you focus on new skills to move from manager to coach, keep in mind: You are a verb, not a noun! In every moment of life and the workplace, change happens within, around and between us, and every change produces more change. Instead of foolishly trying to avoid the inevitable, anticipate it and embrace the opportunity of it.

About the author:

Dr. Rick Kirschner, bestselling author, speaker, executive coach and consultant, has shared his insights and ideas for positive change, The Art of Change Skills for Life™, with people worldwide since 1980. His ideas on communication and conflict resolution are found in USA Today, London Times, Wall Street Journal and Executive Excellence, among others. To learn more about Rick and his work visit <http://www.theartofchange.com/index.html>