



TenStep Supplemental Paper

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The Big Meal Combo!

The merits of learning professionals with training and coaching skills

With the blurring of the lines between coaching and learning, learning professionals may soon be asked to don the coach's hat! While they may go around without the actual title of a coach the learning curricula of most organizations includes coaching as a part of their program design. The need to merge the two functions (learning and coaching) stems from the fact that often even the best of learning sessions fails to create as much of an impact as coaching. This is not to say that one should be sacrificed for the other. However, as learning and coaching grow inseparable, learning professionals need to polish their coaching skills to leverage learning.

Is classroom training insufficient?

A successful executive was asked, "How did you learn what you needed to know to be successful?" The trainer was surprised when the executive did not attribute his success to 'classroom learning'. However, the executive did speak about his work experiences. He described challenging tasks, even those at which he had failed. He spoke about how his failures forced him to apply creative and innovative ideas and learn new skills. He spoke reverentially and rather fondly about trainers or learning professionals who assisted him through challenging situations.

By questioning, encouraging and assisting him, these trainers forced him to challenge assumptions, consider alternative courses of action and think in terms of long lasting solutions. By moving out of classrooms to extend helping hands learning professionals can make up for the shortcomings of classroom training. While learning professionals may not agree that such guidance constitutes coaching, learning analysts believe that this process has the elements of guided reflection- a coaching function. As one trainer rightly says, "Coaching has always been the core of real learning".

Adding the personal touch

There is less debate now about improving the quality of learning with the help of 'coaches'. From the first recorded 'learning-coaching' relationship of Alexander The Great and his tutor Aristotle to contemporary corporate gurus, analysts now believe that providing guidance or assistance during the learning experience enhances and accelerates the quality of classroom, even online training sessions.

Training and development activities are considered complete if they include elements based on education, experience, feedback and coaching. While educating sans the opportunity to apply (what is learned) is mere information transfer, subtracting 'reflection' from experience would result in the learner being involved in a meaningless activity. Therefore, guided reflection, feedback through questioning and coaching are now considered vital elements of the learning process. Organizations must focus on these three elements especially when learning programs are designed to facilitate change.



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The identity crisis

Advising and coaching are often erroneously considered synonymous terms. Quality learning takes place when both the learner and leader, through appreciative inquiry develop a practical and reasoned point of view. Such learning provides a foundation for developmental activities. Coaching is not only about accepting the leaders' point of view; however, the success of advising is measured in terms of the rate of adoption (of the leader's point of view). As a result advising may lead to an increase in learner dependency and may not support developmental activities either.

Hands in too many pies!

Why is it important for learning professionals to develop coaching skills? Despite dedicated training budgets and investment of hours and months in the training and development of employees, people still leave the organization. Besides other reasons, such employee flights stem from the fact that while their learning experience prepares them for generating innovative ideas and solutions, the organization fails to recognize their special abilities. In other words, most organizations ignore two important developmental aspects- job promotions and job developing.

Developing employees, as one consultant says, "takes more than writing 'equal opportunity' into your organizations and mission statement. It takes more than sending someone to a training class. Development takes coaches, it takes guides, and it takes advocates". In addition to training, organizations must get their learning professionals to guide and assist employees through the learning process. Employee coaching aside, learning professionals must be made responsible for 'coaching' the management on the employee potential. As learning professionals have first hand up to date information regarding existing knowledge and skills levels within the organizations they are best suited to assist in job promotions and job developing.

Most organizations can ill afford professional coaches. However, why get learning professionals to double up? Organizations with established training departments, even learning organizations recognize that learning is a personal experience. Therefore, willing learners build special bonds with those in charge of their training and developmental activities. Learning professionals in turn build a good rapport with such learners.

Organizations can benefit by leveraging this rapport or special bond especially when employees face 'particular challenges' and need a willing ear and even empathy. For instance, a computer 'un-savvy' employee feels uncomfortable attending an online course. If the employee shares a good rapport with his trainer, he feels free to discuss his concerns. The trainer too reciprocates either by providing guidance or assistance. In this case, the trainer may either allow the employee to work extra hours on the course or train the employer in computer basics.

The added advantage

Behavioral analysts believe that learning experience is enhanced when learners emulate successful role models. These role models act as mentors or guides to help a learner through challenging situations. In the absence or lack of good corporate role models,



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organizations can find substitutes in learning professionals to 'teach' employees to react to challenging situations.

Hand-in-hand

It is important for organizations to establish a 'coaching culture' to enable learning professionals to multitask as trainers and coaches. Running through this checklist should help.

1. Coaching should not be included merely because it comes highly recommended. Establish learning goals and develop a coaching program as a support system.
2. Conduct exit interviews to find out why talented employees leave. If the reason is the lack of job developing and job promotions, mobilize learning professionals to pitch in.
3. Ensure top management buy-in.

The learning-coaching combination works best for leadership training programs. However, with learning and coaching growing inseparable, organizations should insist that their learning professionals develop coaching skills as well.