



Coaching vs. Counseling: The Fine Line

by Cris Aguilar

Two questions that often come up during training classes are: “How many times do I need to coach to see results?” and “When do I move from coaching to counseling?” A good approach to answer these questions is by having trainees define both terms. Their answers often trigger more discussion on each skill and applications. These definitions become valuable input and can shape the class and approach to content.

Coaching

During a sports game, coaches prompt or urge players with instructions so they can change their performance and play towards winning. Prior to a game, coaches train players in the rules of a game; provide knowledge about the game and specific skills (throw, kick, etc.), and work with players on their ability (faster, higher, stronger, etc.), and willingness (such as being able to replicate good performance). Coaches invest time in making sure players understand the game and what is required of them on the field. Gradually, coaches

test their performance and eventually release them to play and to win.

At work, coaching starts with new hires. They pass through tryouts (recruitment and selection), where HR identifies their aptitude for a role and hires them. Then, they are assigned to a specific team. Some bring lots of experience to a role, while others have very little experience, if any. At work coaching provides new hires with knowledge and skills that they either do not have or enhances ones they already possess. Coaching can build their ability to perform without outside help, and encourages them to do more (quantitative) or better (qualitative) work each time they perform. Eventually, the coach releases them to perform on their own, with minimal to no supervision.

Coaching usually ends when a new hire’s onboarding period ends. The assumption is there will not be any issues with performance – whether an assignment or task changes, new software is implemented, an entire team is reconfigured, or an employee has personal issues to deal with. The assumption is that performance will remain as good as when the onboarding was completed and the new hire was designated as “ready.” This is a costly assumption. To make things worse, when a performance gap arises, coaching is not typically considered. Often the employee is issued a written warning for unacceptable performance, and as a remedy, he or she is sent to training (or retraining), because he or she must have forgotten how to perform (skills and knowledge). This is why most coaching fails. Often it only focuses on knowledge and skills, not on the person’s ability or willingness to perform as trained and expected.

Sending someone with performance issues to training (or retraining) does not work. They do not need to relearn the job they have been doing for so long. What they need is to be provided with feedback on their ability (which can increase and be sustained with advice and recognition) and motivation. How many capable people do you know that at times do not perform as trained? Class after class and their performance continues to decline? To infer that a performance issue is solely an attitude problem is myopic. Coaching requires seeing beyond the evident – assessing performers in their task knowledge, skill, ability and willingness.

Coaching requires taking the time to understand why performance is faltering and identifying the best approach to fix it. Coaching requires seeing a performance gap holistically (employee, task, and environment), and devising a plan to assist the employee to get back in the game. Said plan needs

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to include reasonable goals, agreed-upon progress checks, and ways to adapt the plan if need be. Why then is it easier to write employees up? Because coaching takes time.

If you are implementing a coaching plan and the employee is not willing to meet your efforts halfway, then you should consider counseling, and only then. How many times should you coach? It depends. At times, an employee might only need a quick nudge to understand that he or she should perform as expected. If the quick nudge works, do not forget to praise their ability to perform as expected and their willingness to sustain the desired performance. Perhaps the nudge is not enough, and you might need to have a more formal meeting to address the performance issue. If you see results, provide feedback and follow through until you see that the desired performance is sustained. Will it take some employees longer than others? Indeed. Invest in knowing your employees; to know them is to manage them. You decide how many times you coach. Coaching is about results – if you are getting them, praise the employee. If you are not, evaluate whether more coaching is warranted, or if you need to, move to the next stage.

Counseling

Aside from the clinical definition, counseling at work is usually one more (and at times a final) opportunity for an employee to improve and get back to the expected level of performance. Counseling works best when coaching has been documented and executed diligently. When you have given the employee the chances to improve and have not seen results due to their unwillingness to perform, even with all the resources, then it is time to transition into counseling.

A common issue is that there is no clear-cut procedure to move from coaching into counseling for performance issues. Most organizations have a clear procedure for attendance issues, because they are quantifiable. However, when performance is subpar because of a behavior problem, what procedures should be used? If there is not a clear cut guideline, policy and procedure, ask the following questions:

1. Is the employee informed of any changes that affect what he or she does?

An employee's unwillingness could be a symptom/reaction to unclear communication or lack thereof. If procedural changes were not communicated, employees would not be able to perform as expected. Do not assume they always know what you know.

2. Does the employee have the tools to perform as expected?

Deficient equipment does affect an employee's willingness to perform as expected. Time away from the gaming floor to recharge radios or change batteries is time lost connecting with guests, making a great impression and building lasting relationships.

3. Is the employee trained to perform as expected?

A new version of software could affect performance if users have not been told about it or trained on it. With performance, do not assume that the level of confidence will remain the same without proper training when an element of the task changes.

4. Is the employee motivated to perform as expected?

Have you been available and visible? Have you acknowledged them on their performance or have you been meager with praise?

5. Is the employee capable of performing as expected?

Not to be construed as is the employee physically able to do the job, but rather, at this time, is he or she mentally able to perform as expected? Perhaps he or she is unable to perform as expected for reasons beyond their and your control. Someone who typically performs well must be having a lot to deal with for his or her performance to dwindle. Recall that a performance gap needs to be assessed holistically.

If all these questions have been answered “yes,” and the employee's behavior is already impacting the team and operations, then counseling is the next step. Follow your company's policy to start the progressive discipline process, and make sure you follow it well in order to have a defensible case if it ends in a termination. The last thing you want is for the person to be brought back to the team (with performance and behavior issues), only because he or she was wrongfully terminated.

It is possible that the employee could improve their performance at the first step of progressive discipline. If that happens, then the employee will need coaching to sustain the desired performance. Most companies offer several opportunities for employees to improve. Make sure you are there to support them in their efforts. After all, coaching never ends. ♣

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