



Same Face, Different Voices

One of the more consistent messages we hear from our clients is that managers and supervisors would welcome the chance to establish a coaching relationship with their direct reports, but that the employees are often not receptive to the coaching. This pattern appears to be nearly universal in that we hear it from every corner of our customer base, regardless of company size or industry. Our experience in the development of strong communication relationships between supervisors and direct reports provides us with a number of ways that we can increase the likelihood that employees will accept, even embrace, coaching assistance from their bosses. Ultimately, it all comes down to different voices for different roles.

We have had the chance to ask our participants all over the United States, and internationally as well, an important set of questions about coaching. The answers uniformly demonstrate how different the voice of coaching sounds from the voice of managing.

For example, imagine that you are a member of an effective team in virtually any team-related endeavor. Further, imagine that you are clearly aware that one of the reasons for the success of your team is your coach. He/she is central to the continuous improvement that all team members buy into and are committed to. With that imaginary setting in place, would you want your coach to watch you as you perform on the team? Of course, the answer is typically “yes,” because we realize that the coach’s job is to help us improve in our role and his/her feedback is targeted to that end result. That’s what a good coach does, and as team members, we rely on the coach’s feedback.

Now let’s imagine that instead of a highly effective team, we are a department in the workplace, with a manager in charge of our department. What happens to our perceptions when we ask, “Do you want the manager to watch you closely while you are doing your job?” More often than not the answer is “No, that’s micromanagement and is totally unnecessary.”

These two scenarios clearly demonstrate two of the contrasting roles that managers and supervisors fill for their employees. The problem in increasing the motivation of employees to accept coaching really boils down to understanding how those roles differ and what each voice sounds like.

Recently, one supervisor with whom we were working showed up at his second training session with a remarkable solution to sorting the voices for coaching versus managing. He had two company ball caps borrowed from the company’s softball team. On one of them he’d made a sign that said “Boss,” on the other, “Coach.” In the manufacturing environment in which he worked, he explained that now, each time he leaves his office to talk to one or more of the employees he manages, he determines which hat is appropriate. He explained that this simple task has helped him with clearer communication, as a preparation tool.

Further, when this supervisor approaches his employees on the plant floor and they see which hat he is wearing, they know what to expect. There are times when he needs to deliver clear directions, explain goals and performance targets or deliver information about safety or other company rules. That’s when the “Boss” hat is appropriate. It connotes a more directive voice, with perhaps a shortened dialogue centered on understanding and clarity.

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Other times, when his employees see the “Coach” hat they know that the communication is designed for them personally to maximize their contribution to the team’s success and to their own positive outcomes as well. They know that they can, and should, engage in as much dialogue as they need to apply the new feedback, and that the coach is encouraging that conversation. Whether the communication content is positive or critical, they still have the awareness that the intent is to strengthen performance.

Sometimes this supervisor wears one hat but is carrying the other, changing them to demonstrate a change in the voice he needs to use. The whole idea may seem a bit drastic, but it is working for

that team remarkably well. Realistically, each team member may not embrace those moments when their manager is wearing the Coach hat, but at least they are clear about the intent and their respective role.

Even if the idea of two hats seems a bit much for many supervisors, the idea of differentiating between the distinct roles of Coach and Manager for the members of the team can improve communication significantly. Employees have an understanding of those different roles their manager relies on and, in the final analysis, the employee can see their personal benefit within each role.

