

Catch The Coach

*Many managers are still cynical about coaching, seeing it as a time-consuming method of mollycoddling staff, but they couldn't be more wrong says **Nick Pole**, because coaching isn't about propping staff up, it's about helping them to find their own feet.*

A Japanese master of shiatsu – the art of health and healing through awareness and touch – liked to get his students' attention by saying: 'Women can't do shiatsu because they are not decisive enough.' An embarrassed by respectful silence would follow while he let the remark sink in.

The he would say: 'Men can't do shiatsu, because they are not sensitive enough.' With his audience now in the ideal state of Zen bewilderment he would proceed to demonstrate on a volunteer, sometimes using the most sensitive and feminine kind of listening touch and sometimes using such powerfully masculine thumb pressure that the result could be truly agonising.

I remembered this recently at a weekend devoted to coaching and mentoring in my professional shiatsu association. Just as shiatsu, acupuncture and eastern medicine having established themselves in the west over the past 30 years, often in the face of hostility from the traditionally macho medical culture, so has coaching become accepted as best practice in management, even though many managers still regard it with suspicion. In fact, eastern medicine and coaching have a lot in common – both put strong emphasis on paying very finely tuned attention to the client and treating them holistically.

As in coaching, so in shiatsu, the practitioner remains centred and neutral, aiming to help the person to discover that the answer is already inside them, but in a place they don't usually look. In both disciplines the emphasis is on helping the person take responsibility for their own progress rather than the practitioner being an expert who is going to 'fix' them. Both can be uncomfortably challenging but hugely rewarding too.

But when the 'hard' skills of modern management already take up so much time, can't things like coaching be left to the professionals? Why should a manager bother to learn how to coach? The real reason is that coaching is catching. Once you have experienced the amazing way in which an apparently minimal intervention can help you move forward in you career, it's something you want other people to know about.

A friend who is now a senior executive in a Washington DC-based research company told me that in her former job she had a boss who was abusive and a bully, especially towards women. Luckily, the company had just started employing a team of professional coaches so that both she and her boss had their own personal coaches. My friend made great strides, learning how to use more assertive body language and that she could insist on taking a break when her boss was getting into one of his abusive tirades. But when the boss's coach challenged him on his behaviour towards he staff, all he could say ultimately was, 'They just don't understand me.' As for my friend, she found the experience of coaching so powerful that she decided to move to another company in a more senior role and with a better salary. She now considers taking younger employees out to lunch for a bit of gentle mentoring to be a natural – and enjoyable – part of her job.

Reap What You Sow

If the aim of good management is to build trust, motivation and skills in those you manage and in yourself, then learning some fundamental coaching skills can make a huge difference to what you can get from your team and what they can get from you. The power of coaching has nothing to do with technology – it comes from the coach's ability to offer their full and undivided attention in a calm and centred way. That kind of attention is probably one of the most precious things you have to offer as a manager, the key question is – as busy as you are, and holding as many things in your head as you do – how can you make that switch from giving someone the minimum amount of attention that the job requires, to giving them your full attention so that for the 20 minutes or so you have agreed to spend with them as a coach, their goals, needs and feelings are more important than your own?

One way is to remember a time when you really benefited from that kind of help yourself, maybe from a person or maybe from an object that has sentimental value, from an animal or even a place, like a particular glen I know in Scotland. When I walk the hills there on my own they seem in some mysterious way to know more about my real potential than I know myself. This can be a powerful exercise and one that really helps to tap into the true spirit of coaching and what it means for you.

Another technique I use to switch myself into a coaching frame of mind is to repeat silently to myself a particular West African greeting. It is so simple and effective in helping people to connect with each other, that I often use it to help people get acquainted in workshops. Two people approach each other, leaving enough space between them to have the other person's whole body in their field of vision. The first person says, 'I see you' to which the second person replies, 'I am here'. They then switch the greeting round. It helps if you add the person's name to what you say. What makes it so effective as a way of meeting someone is not just the words themselves but the state of openness and presence that they invite you to adopt. When you say 'I see you,' imagine you are seeing the whole person as if their soul was as visible as their clothes. Then when you say 'I am here,' bring your attention to your abdomen and feel or imagine a direct connection going straight down from there into the earth beneath you. The idea here is to remind yourself what it feels like to be comfortably centred in yourself, the kind of centred feeling you might have when doing yoga, or lying on a beach, or after a really satisfying meal. As soon as you start paying attention to someone else, maintaining that centre is really hard for most people to do. Rather than staying truly centred we often tilt ourselves unconsciously towards or away from the other person depending on how we really feel about them. This puts you off balance metaphorically as well as physically. When you say, 'I am here,' check just how centred you really feel and adjust your position if necessary. Good coaching, like good shiatsu, is not about saying, 'I am here'. It's about allowing the other person to have the space they need and to hold it for them. It's not about letting people lean on you, it's about helping them to find and trust their own two feet. Both shiatsu and coaching involve – as a Japanese master was hinting in his Zen-like way – a real balance of masculine and feminine qualities – and what could be challenging than that?

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