Cheap and cheerful

*Coaching is the most cost-effective way to learn – little and often.*
Jonathan Brown and Richard Wilkes explain why

A conversation about coaching between a coach and a manager might typically go along these lines:

“Good to see you again, Fran. What are you up to these days?” You know me, Pat – the usual.”

“Have you ever thought about coaching instead of the ‘the usual’? It’s a really effective way of connecting with your staff.”

“I connect with them five days a week. I know them as well as I want to, thanks very much. And I’m sure they feel the same about me.”

“Coaching helps to structure people’s relationships, Fran.” “Structure? I’m the boss and they’re my staff.”

“Think of it as developing them.” “They’re adults, Pat – responsible for their own development.”

The conversation reflects a fairly common stand-off between people’s needs and so-called business needs. But the main reason for adopting coaching is to increase efficiency and competitiveness. It involves helping people to develop with less effort and more speed than they are doing currently. Coaching raises self-belief awareness and responsibility. Asking questions and being nice to people is not what it’s about, but it may help.

The people are the business, so the choice is no longer “develop your people or carry on as before,” but “develop your people or the organisation won’t survive.” Changes that previously took 10 to 20 years to happen are now tearing through previously established sectors in 12 to 18 months. This rate of change and competition will only increase.

Civil aircraft manufacturer Airbus has had a coaching programme since 2002. This has allowed it to reinforce a common leadership and results–focused culture in a highly competitive industry. The people who have been coached transfer the model to other groups in the firm.

“Airbus recognises that its people are pioneers for change who drive the organisation forward,” says Jonathan Miller, vice-president of people integration and leadership culture. “The more effective our people, the higher our business performance.”

Airbus manufactured more civil aircraft even than Boeing last year – compelling evidence to support the drive for a coaching culture.

The coach’s role is not to have all the answers, but to create the environment where people can find their own ways of meeting customers’ every changing needs.

In many respects, the “new trend” of coaching is actually the latest attempt to answer the questions that inspired Frederick Taylor, who founded the principles behind mass production, to develop “scientific management” in the late 1800s.

He was obsessed with the questions “what are workers capable of?” and “what is possible?” In his quest for efficiency and “the one right way,” Taylor put the system before the people.
Today, it’s people that make the difference, since everyone can have the same system. When our unit of productive resource is a unique human being, there is no one right way. Once we grasp this, we can also accept that working successfully with people will be messy. We must somehow find a way to love the mess when all our lives we have been taught to tidy up. It is great that companies are now devoting so much time to diversity. The investment will start to pay off when each individual is encouraged to be themselves.

Organisational success now relies on the ability of each and every employee to learn faster than the competition. Arie de Geus, author of *The Living Company*, has said that learning may be the only competitive advantage that matters in the 21st century, because all other advantages rely on it. Coaching helps people to learn at work and to build their capacity for learning. It’s the cheapest way to learn – little and often.

To all the Pats of this world: don’t simply push the barrel of coaching apples in the direction of firms expecting them to tuck in. Have some facts; get some evidence; be a bit more savvy. The business arguments are irrefutable. To all the Frans: you probably do a great job and have an excellent team, but try to think outside the “deliverables” box. You might surprise yourself and achieve better results.

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