

On-the job coaching: a changing world



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Learning can be a bit mystifying. But given the right information and lots of encouragement, the outcome can be rewarding for all those involved. Pat Mitchell outlines his own sensitive approach for making coaching work.

Part of the fun and (sometimes) frustration of working in organisations is that nothing stands still and more often than not success brings in its train another set of challenges to be faced. A classic example is the effect that adapting organisations to the increasing pace and complexity of the world in which they operate has had on the training and development of those who work in them. Hierarchies have got flatter. Staff levels have been cut. Support services have been outsourced. Flexibility and multi-skilling are the order of the day. Rapid change brings the need for constant learning.

The good news is that all of this makes training even more important than in the past. There is no longer room for passengers in organisations. We've all got to have the skill and knowledge to pull our weight. Unfortunately, as the need for training has increased, the time available to do it has got less and less. So what's the solution? Well it's easy to say, but more difficult to do. We've all got to become trainers, sharing our knowledge and skills by coaching one another on the job, at the workplace.

But hang on for a minute. Those of us who have been around for a while remember when this approach was called 'Sitting with Nellie', as in: 'Go and watch Nellie. She's the expert. You'll soon pick it up!' We were all very disparaging about this and with good reason. The good reason, of course, was that no one had taught Nellie how to pass her expertise to other people. It is often the case that those who are good at a task are hopeless at helping others to learn, as most of us whose parents attempted to teach us to drive know to our cost!

Fortunately the ability to coach others is not an inherited gene. It is a skill that can be learned. Dramatic improvements come from mastering a few simple principles. One of the pleasures I have experienced while running coaching skills training for a cross-section of people over the past few years – lorry drivers, warehouse operatives, IT specialists, customer service team leaders and others – is just how quickly they grow in confidence and competence, and also what a kick they get out of doing it well.

So what are the principles? What abilities does a good workplace coach need to possess? I think there are seven. Coaches need to be able to:

- prepare
- set the scene
- watch their language
- catch learners doing something right
- criticise without crucifying
- go step by step, and
- follow up

These 'abilities' are more crusts of common sense than pillars of wisdom, but, fortunately for the way most of us who read *Training Journal* earn our livings, the gap between common sense and common practice is often pretty wide.

THE ABILITY TO PREPARE

Sometimes it is necessary to reassure people that we are not talking about the level of preparation needed to launch the Space Shuttle. For some tasks, sending the learner off in search of two cups of coffee may provide the coach with enough time to get his or her head straight, first about objectives and then about IPA – the individual, the Plan and the Arrangements.

Objectives first

The simple, powerful message is that good coaches focus on the learner. They don't say: 'What am I going to do to this person?' Instead they ask themselves: 'What will this person be able to do as a result of being coached?' Not only does this provide a clear measure of success for the coach – if the person can perform

the task you have succeeded and is s/he can't you haven't – but also it is a much more motivating message for the learner. I sometimes wish that dentists would follow this principle. I'd rather be told 'As a result of this procedure you will still be eating apples when you are 85' than 'My objective is to dig a huge hole in one of your teeth'.

Then, the Individual

Forewarned is forearmed and the more we know about the person we will coach the better able we will be to adapt our approach to suit. In particular, remember the magic question 'Have you ever done anything like this before?' The answer enables us to pitch our coaching at the right level, neither too complicated nor, too simple.

I once had the misfortune at university to attend lectures from a Nobel Prize winner. He had concluded, correctly, that compared to him we were all seriously educationally challenged, but going right back to stuff we had done at GCSE was definitely a mistake.

Next, the Plan

Sometimes this can be a 'back of an envelope' job, but only so long as it meets certain simple criteria. Take a look at Table 1, which is an example plan for making a mug of instant coffee, and note the following.

- The task is broken down into a series of logical steps. The more complex the task, the more important it is to present it to the learner in bite-sized chunks.
- What to do at each step is clearly set out, again in the right order. This helps to prevent the coach confusing the learner by having to say: 'Sorry, I should have told you earlier.'
- For each step there is a list of key points and reasons. It is essential to help the learner understand why the task needs to be performed in a certain way.

Table 1: Example of a plan – how to make a mug of instant coffee

Steps	What to do	Key points/Reasons
Boil Water	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fill kettle • Leave to boil 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No more water than is needed to fill mug (saves energy) • Do first so you can prepare mug while waiting for water to boil
Prepare mug	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check cleanliness • Add Instant coffee 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dirty mugs are a health hazard • Vary amount for weak/strong
Pour water	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pour water • Stir 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep hand away from steam • For efficient mixing
Add flavour (if required)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Add milk • Add sugar • Stir 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vary amounts for preference • For efficient mixing

Finally, the Arrangements

Simple common sense is the guide here. Where and when should you do this? Does the equipment you will use work? Have you got the right pieces of paper? If you are using a computer, who should sit at the keyboard? You or the learner? Would a Blue Peter approach – 'Here is one I made earlier' – be helpful?...and so on.

THE ABILITY TO SET THE SCENE

When time is pressing there can be a temptation to jump straight into the first step of your coaching plan. Resist it. Human beings don't like magical mystery tours. Before launching into the subject it is essential to make sure that the learner is clear about the context of the task, the objectives and how you will work together to achieve these.

Explaining the context of the job helps the learner to understand why it matters and where it fits into the bigger organisational picture. It can also help to counter a common tendency in organisations for people to concentrate on their own narrow concerns, ignoring the effect they have on others.

Stressing the learner-focused objectives right at the beginning will motivate the learner, but at the same time will raise the obvious question ‘How are we going to get there?’ So setting the scene involves explaining the process – particularly the following.

- Outline the step-by-step breakdown. It will increase the learner’s confidence to see that the task consists of a series of manageable steps. And the breakdown will act as a ‘roadmap’, which you can refer to while coaching.
- Describe how you will work together. This means saying for example, ‘I’ll do this at normal speed, then again slowly, then you have a go’ or ‘I’ll do Step 1, then you copy me’.
- Explain the importance of ‘coaching as conversation’. It’s not a lecture. The more the learner is involved, rather than passively watching and listening, the better coaching will work. So start conversations as soon as you can by asking questions. Make sure the learner understands that you welcome questions and comments at any point in the process.

THE ABILITY TO WATCH YOUR OWN LANGUAGE

Partly this about terminology – words. Keep it simple, explain any technical terms and expand any acronyms you use. All organisations and specialisms develop their own private language. Part of the role of a coach is to act as interpreter. Think about the questions you use. Open ones – for example, ‘Why do you think we do it that way?’ – encourage conversation. Closed ones – for example, ‘Should that switch be on?’ – nail down particular pieces of information.

Then there is body language – the coach’s and the learner’s. The learner’s body language will sometimes tell you more than the words he (or she) uses. In particular, we all like to be helpful and avoid appearing stupid. So when you say ‘Have you got that?’, the learner may reply ‘Yes’ when it is clear from his body language that the answer should have been ‘No’. Learners will also be conscious of their coaches’ body language and tone of voice. It is important not to appear frustrated or impatient when the learner is struggling a bit. So have open body posture, an encouraging expression and a positive tone.

THE ABILITY TO CATCH THE LEARNER DOING SOMETHING RIGHT

I sometimes wish that giving praise and encouragement was a complex skill so that we’d have to think about it more consciously than we do. But it isn’t. It’s very easy. The problem is that most of us don’t do nearly enough of it. Good coaches take every opportunity to build the learner’s confidence by praising success and giving encouragement when the individual is struggling a little. When you do this:

- be specific; tell the learner precisely what he or she has done well
- put misgivings into perspective; some people react to praise by putting themselves down (‘It’s not as good as yours’ or ‘At least I’ve got something right’). This can be rather irritating. Keep stressing the positive. Though the progress being made may be small, help the learner to put it in perspective. (‘Remember that I’ve been doing this for a long time. Don’t worry, it’ll come with practice’)

THE ABILITY TO CRITICISE WITHOUT CRUCIFYING

Coaches don’t do learners any favours by ignoring errors. When they do something wrong you have to let them know about it. But there are dos and don’ts about giving criticism.

The dos

- Do ask rather than tell. Try to get the learner to think about the problem. So ask, for example, ‘Can you see anything not quite right with what you have done?’ Then give the person a chance to answer. (One question to avoid is ‘What are you doing?’)
- Do focus on reasons. Once you have established what the learner has done, ask, for example, ‘What would happen if you left it like that?’
- Do stress any key points – for example, ‘We have to do it this way because that is what our customers demand’ or ‘Never forget that safety comes first’.
- Do encourage the learner to fix the problem.

The don'ts

- Don't personalise the criticism. If you tell someone what he (or she) has done, it is possible for him to change his behaviour the next time around, but, changing our personalities is beyond most of us.
- Don't use sarcasm. Again, watch your tone of voice and facial expression.
- Don't take over unless it would be dangerous not to. Making a mistake is demoralising enough, when you are the learner. Having the coach jump in and demonstrate how foolish you have been makes it worse.

THE ABILITY TO GO STEP BY STEP

Being coached can sometimes be like asking for directions in a strange city. It all seems crystal clear at the outset ('Straight on here, past the Red Lion, left at the lights, second right, third left you can't miss it!'), but five minutes later you are completely lost. The analogy works in another way as well. Many people's reaction to being lost is to go on driving in the hope that they'll see something familiar. Similarly learners are often reluctant to interrupt their coach and admit that they don't know where they are. You can do the following to prevent this happening.

- Use the step-by-step structure you outlined when setting the scene (and ask). As you complete each step, say to the learner something like 'OK. That completes Steps 1 and 2. Can you remember what comes next?'
- Summarise. At natural break points, particularly the end of each step, recap on what has just been done ('That's Step 3 and it involved doing four things... And the reason for doing the last of these was...')
- Test understanding. Ask questions to check that the learner is still with you. In particular, use open questions ('What can we do next?') and ask for reasons ('Can you remember why we did that?')

THE ABILITY TO FOLLOW UP

By the end of a coaching session the learner should be able to perform the task to a reasonable standard (check your learner-focused objectives). But perfection takes a little longer, so follow-up is essential.

Learners must be given the opportunity to practise their new skills. It will take them time to get up to speed and, in doing so, they will almost certainly come across variations that haven't been covered during the original coaching session.

Once they have been practising for a while, you, as the coach, will need to spend some time with them again doing two things.

- Answering their outstanding questions. It is often the case that people don't ask very many questions when you first start coaching them because they simply don't understand the task well enough to know what to ask. But practise changes that.
- Correcting errors. Inevitably learners will overlook some key points, or try to take short cuts or simply get in a muddle. When this happens, don't get frustrated (or at least, don't show it!). Go over what has gone wrong until you are satisfied that the learner can do it right.

CONCLUSION

These then are the seven principles of on-the-job coaching (see Table 2 for a summary). When experienced people follow these to pass on their expertise to their colleagues they will avoid the dangers of 'sitting with Nellie' training and begin to build a culture of effective, continuous learning in their organisations. They will also get an immense amount of satisfaction from doing so.

Table 2: Seven principles of effective on –the- job coaching

1. PREPARE

- Set learner-focused objectives.
- Think about IPA: the individual (what does he or she know?); the Plan (step-by-step breakdown, what to do, key points and reasons); and the Arrangements.

2. SET THE SCENE

- Put the task in context.
- Explain the objectives, the step-by-step approach, how you will work together and ‘it’s a conversation’.

3. WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

- Keep it simple.
- Use the right questions.
- Be aware of body language – yours and the learner’s.

4. CATCH THE LEARNER DOING SOMETHING RIGHT

- Give specific praise.
- Put misgivings into perspective.

5. CRITICISE WITHOUT CRUCIFYING

- Don’t personalise criticism, use sarcasm or take over unless you have to.
- Do ask (rather than tell), focus on reasons, stress key points and encourage the learner to fix the problem.

6. GO STEP BY STEP

- Use the step-by-step structure.
- Summarise.
- Test understanding.

7. FOLLOW UP

- Let the learner practise.
- Answer his or her outstanding questions.
- Correct any errors.

Pat’s latest project, *On-the-Job coaching: a 90 minute Workout*, is a multi-media programme developed and published by Fenman. If you’d like to talk with him about running this workout in your organisation, please contact Pat at (tel) 01223 527266 or (e-mail) mitchell@patmitch.demon.co.uk

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