



Performance Coaching: The One-Size-Fits-All Dilemma

In any organization, managers and supervisors are expected to coach their employees. While this is a critical component of managing performance, we all know there are successful and unsuccessful coaches. In the absence of specific training, many people assume that good coaching equates to good communication skills. However, good coaching begins with accurately diagnosing the employee's specific performance levels and then choosing an appropriate coaching style for that situation. Only then do good communication skills come into play. Few managers are inherently excellent, adaptable coaches; coaching is a learned, and teachable, set of skills.

The absence of effective coaching—whether it stems from lack of training or a reliance on personal coaching preferences—results in under-management. Thus, a large body of research has been dedicated to developing theories of effective coaching. One of these theories—perhaps the one that has the most efficacy and is most pragmatic—is known as “contingency theory.”

Contingency theory, as it relates to performance coaching, best addresses the age-old management paradox of balancing a manager's concern for task—getting results—and people—leading people respectfully and effectively. Contingency theory advocates that there is no universal “should”—that is, there is no one best coaching style. Fritz Perls, the father of Gestalt Therapy, articulated contingency theory best when he stated that there is only one “should” that matters—*context*. He writes,

*"There is only one thing that should control: **the situation**. If you understand the situation you are in and let the situation you are in control your actions, then you learn to cope with life."*

Contingency theory is the basis of Performance Based Coaching™—a contingency coaching model created by Rick Tate and Dr. Julie White, senior managing partners at Impact Achievement Group, Inc. The foundation of this coaching approach is an effective method for diagnosing the performance “vital signs” of employees. This model suggests “diagnosis”—assessing the “task specific” current performance of an employee—prior to “prescription”—the choice of a coaching style by the manager or supervisor. Based on the diagnosis of the task-specific performance level of the employee, the manager then chooses a coaching style that provides the amounts of structure, direction, teaching,

Contingency Theory:

Suggests that there is no universal 'should'—no one best coaching style.

involvement, joint problem solving, or autonomy that the diagnosed performance level requires.

A recent study conducted by Impact Achievement Group Inc. in partnership with HRmarketer shows evidence that many managers and supervisors:

- lack effective diagnostic skills for determining the coaching needs of employees;
- lack flexibility in their choice of coaching style with employees; and
- fail to provide the appropriate amount of direction, clarity, and structure for employees.

The study took place in Q1 2011 and used a 10-point scale designed to measure the impact of managers and supervisors in terms of capturing the engagement and discretionary effort of employees. Specifically, the survey questions examined to what extent supervisors and managers are effective at performance diagnosis, able to adapt their coaching style, and able to provide sufficient structure, direction, and teaching when necessary. Those surveyed included human resource and training professionals, managers and chief executive officers.

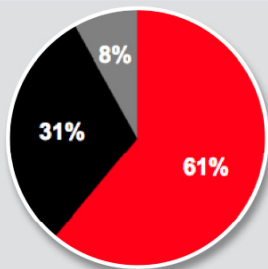
For the purposes of this survey, a score of 1 to 5.9 or “No impact” means there is no evidence that managers and supervisors are being effective. A score of 6.0 To 7.9 represents “Inconsistent impact”—that the predictable effectiveness is moderate at best. And a score of 8 to 10 represents “Consistent impact”—it is highly predictable that the managers or supervisors are consistently effective in their coaching practices.

These scores will correlate in the pie charts to follow with “Rarely,” “Sometimes” and “Consistently,” respectively.

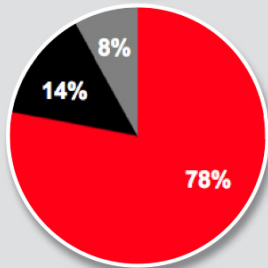
The ultimate purpose of coaching in an organization is to engage employees and capture their engagement as it relates to their job—that is, to gain their discretionary performance. Engaged, talented employees are prime drivers of overall productivity.

Where under-management exists, these drivers suffer—and so do desired retention rates. Consistently effective coaching is vital to an organization’s bottom line. As this study’s results will demonstrate, that means many companies are in real trouble.

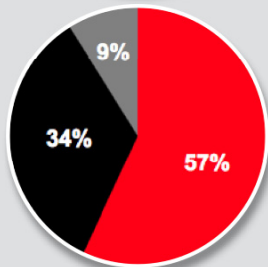
Over 60% of managers and supervisors receive failing grades for effective performance diagnosis and coaching style adaptability.



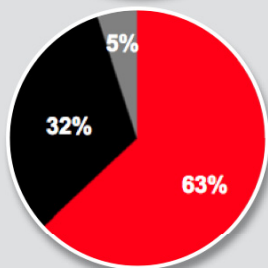
When asked *how well managers and supervisors accurately assess employee performance issues to determine the right type of corrective action and/or coaching that is necessary*, we find that **61%** of managers and supervisors fail to receive a passing grade and that only **8%** are considered excellent.



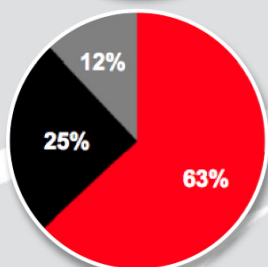
When asked *how effective managers and supervisors are at adapting their coaching style to meet the variety of performance situations they must deal with*, we find that **78%** of managers and supervisors fail to receive a passing grade and that only **8%** are excellent at adapting their coaching style.



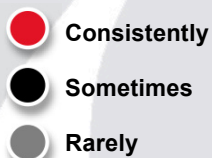
When asked *how effective managers and supervisors are at providing the necessary direction, guidance, teaching, and structure for their direct reports who are new to the job or who take on new responsibilities*, we find that **57%** of managers and supervisors fail to receive a passing grade and that only **9%** are excellent at ensuring necessary direction.



When asked *whether managers and supervisors, when providing autonomy and delegating decision-making authority to employees, ensure this is done with clear expectations, clear parameters of authority, and necessary guidance*, we find that **63%** of managers and supervisors fail to receive a passing grade and that only **5%** are excellent at managing delegation and autonomy effectively.



When asked *how well managers and supervisors intervene in a timely and effective manner when a direct report's performance is not meeting acceptable standards or an individual's performance has dropped below past levels*, we find that **63%** of managers and supervisors fail to receive a passing grade and that only **12%** are excellent at effectively correcting performance in a timely manner.



These numbers should cause great concern. The evidence is clear that to a large degree, under-management is present in the workplace. This leads to less than desirable employee performance, wasted time using inappropriate coaching styles, “Groundhog Day” coaching (the same discussions conducted over and over again), tolerance for poor and marginal performance, ineffective use of the best employees, and poor manager/employee relationships. These all contribute to less-than-optimal business results—results that could be much better with effective coaching on the part of managers and supervisors.

More often than not, managers and supervisors rely on their comfort zone—their individually preferred style—when coaching and addressing employee performance. This reliance results in the data we found in our survey—which to a large degree matches the anecdotal evidence we

have gathered over the last several years. To counteract this trend toward under-management, managers and supervisors need to develop effective performance diagnostic skills, choose a wider variety of possible coaching interventions, and ensure there is appropriate structure, direction, and clarity provided in an effective cadence of performance management.

One-size-fits-all solutions—like one-size-fits-all hats and t-shirts—fit no one well, and most people poorly. This axiom applies to coaching as well. The manager or supervisor's preferred (comfort zone) coaching style will not meet the needs of the wide variety of performance situations he or she will face. Performance situational adaptability—adaptability that depends on the context of the situation—is a key factor for driving excellent business results.

About Impact Achievement Group

Impact Achievement Group is a training and performance management consulting company that provides assessments, coaching, story-based interactive workshops, and simulations for managers at all levels of organizations worldwide. Impact Achievement Group helps companies dramatically improve management and leadership competency for bottom-line results. Company experts Rick Tate and Julie White, Ph.D. are internationally recognized authorities in leadership development, human performance, customer-focused business strategies and workplace communications.

To find out how Impact Achievement Group can transform your organization's coaching skills, visit www.impactachievement.com.

Appendix: Selected Comments

In order to provide greater context and insight into the current state of management, we have selected representative prose comments from each of the survey questions.

Question 1

Our managers and supervisors accurately assess employee performance issues to determine the right type of corrective action and/or coaching that is necessary.

Comments

- Our managers avoid performance issues.
- Some better than others. Frequently misdiagnose root cause of performance issues.
- They can identify the problems but are not good at following through with the employee.
- Not sure that all of the managers have the skills or tools to adequately assess these issues.
- My organization is still on the management buddy system.

Question 2

Our managers and supervisors are effective at adapting their coaching style to meet the variety of performance situations they must deal with.

Comments

- Our managers try the “one size fits all” coaching style.
- Rarely does a manager adapt their style to meet the situation or the employee's personality.
- I have not seen any adaptation of management styles in the nearly nine years I have been here.
- Nobody has been taught how to adapt their coaching style.
- There is plenty of room for improvement here. Most adhere to their preferred style and are not flexible.

Question 3

Our managers and supervisors are effective at providing the necessary direction, guidance, teaching, and structure for their direct reports who are new to the job or who take on new responsibilities.

Comments

- Too often they leave this to orientation or delegate the training to a subordinate manager or employee, and then fail to follow up.
- Most direction and guidance appears to resemble something between mind-reading and tribal knowledge.
- Standardized orientations help but there is a lot to communicate and often the managers forget.
- I think due to significant time constraints and budget challenges, our supervisors are often over-taxed, and accordingly don't often have the requisite time to bring on employees with the best training/guidance possible.

Question 4

When providing autonomy and delegating decision-making authority to employees, our managers and supervisors ensure this is done with clear expectations, clear parameters of authority, and necessary guidance.

Comments

- Too often they micromanage or fail to follow up properly on delegation. Need delegation training!
- I think supervisors are good at giving autonomy and delegating... until an employee messes up. To me this speaks to unclear expectations.... but leads to the need for increased guidance.
- If autonomy is provided it is because the manager has no clue about the goals for a project. Delegation is a technique for deflecting blame - not getting the job done.

Question 5

Our managers and supervisors intervene in a timely and effective manner when a direct report's performance is not meeting acceptable standards or an individual's performance has dropped below past levels.

Comments

- I think supervisors intervene eventually when pushed up against the wall....and it doesn't always appear to be from a coaching perspective, but from a more punitive one, unfortunately.
- "timely" yes, "effective" – maybe
- If they do intervene, it is because a problem has reached Armageddon proportions. If the world isn't coming to an end, managers will ignore problems.