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## Coaching in Context



**Adapting personalities, behaviors and work styles is crucial to effectively coaching and managing employees. HR leaders must include recognition and understanding of work styles in their organizations' coaching training, with the first step having managers become aware of their own work styles.**

By Casey Mulqueen



America's debt crisis. Presidential candidate debates. The latest cast of "Celebrity Apprentice." Society abounds with examples of conflict and unproductive communication. When manufactured for television, it makes for entertaining viewing; in business, it can be lethal.

Internal coaching is a key communication strategy that holds the promise of greater productivity and employee development, but recent research reveals that managers across the country are failing miserably at their coaching duties.

A study last year by Redmond, Wash.-based Impact Achievement Group, *Performance Coaching: The One-Size-Fits-All Dilemma*, highlights the problem of current coaching practices. The survey -- of human resource and training professionals, managers and chief executive officers -- examines to what extent supervisors and managers are effective at performance diagnosis and how adept they are at adapting their coaching style.

More than three in five (61 percent) managers and supervisors did not receive a passing grade when asked how well they were able to accurately assess employee performance issues to determine the right type of corrective action and/or necessary coaching.

Only 8 percent were considered excellent.

When asked how effective managers and supervisors are at adapting their coaching style to meet the variety of performance situations they encounter, more than three-quarters (78 percent) of managers and supervisors didn't receive a passing grade, and only eight percent were deemed excellent at adapting their coaching style.

In the absence of specific training, managers assume that good coaching equals good communication skills. However, good coaching requires much more than that.

It starts with an accurate understanding of one's own work style and that of the one being coached. Work style refers to the way people prefer to act and interact at work, or their "default" behaviors: keeping to themselves, being an encourager, dominating conversations and so on.

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Because people have never operated in another work style, they tend to assume that their way of operating is the best or correct way. Understandably, this leads to assumptions about motives, character, effort and even the relative worth of various employees.

People unaware of individual work-style preferences typically coach others with the unconscious intent of creating a "Mini-Me." Coming into a coaching session, or into a coachable moment, with such misconceptions sets the stage for ineffective coaching, at best, and discouraging or hostile interactions, at worst.

I once worked with a soft-spoken, easy-going manager whose success was attributed to having good personal relationships with all of his people.

He was an effective leader most of the time, but he had an employee who was the exact opposite in her approach. She was very fast-paced and didn't seem to care whether her boss "liked" her or not.

Whenever he tried to coach her, he ran into a brick wall; he was trying to relate to her on his own terms, always approaching the discussion by emphasizing their collaborative relationship and how he could help her. She saw these conversations as frustrating intrusions on her work.

Even though coaching would have helped her, she felt in control of her own priorities and believed that her manager was trying to take over her duties. To be a more effective coach, he had to learn how to approach her on her own terms, understanding her work style and how he could influence her most effectively.

Fortunately for all involved in the coaching process, work-style awareness can be learned and quickly put into practice, to great effect. A study by my organization, The TRACOM Group, revealed that managers with better work-style-preference awareness are better at leading teams (27 percent); better at coaching others (25 percent); and more likely to be promoted (19 percent).

The first step toward context-specific coaching involves becoming aware of one's own work style. HR leaders can utilize this approach when planning for coaching training. Recognizing and understanding work styles is relatively simple and provides a critical foundation for tailoring coaching strategies to each individual.

### Self-Awareness is the First Step

Every human being falls somewhere along the continuums of assertiveness and responsiveness (how influence is expressed and how emotion is expressed, respectively). The combination of these two factors determines a person's behavioral preferences at work. Though there are subtle variations and unique expressions, work-style preferences break down into four main categories.

### The Thinker

- \* Slower-paced, slow to act;
- \* Makes efforts to establish a process;
- \* Shows less concern for relationships;
- \* Works in a historical time frame;
- \* Takes actions cautiously; and
- \* Tends to avoid personal involvement.

### The Initiator

- \* Faster-paced;

Resource  
Executive  
On



- \* Makes efforts to control outcomes;
- \* Less concerned for caution in relationships;
- \* Works in the present time frame;
- \* Tends to direct the actions of others; and
- \* Tends to avoid inaction.

### The Friend

- \* Slower-paced;
- \* Makes efforts to build relationships;
- \* Shows less concern for effecting change;
- \* Works in the present time frame;
- \* Shows supportive action; and
- \* Tends to avoid conflict.

### The Emoter

- \* Faster-paced;
- \* Makes efforts to be involved;
- \* Shows less concern for routine;
- \* Works in the future time frame;
- \* Tends to act impulsively; and
- \* Tends to avoid isolation.

It becomes quickly apparent that a fast-paced, control-oriented Initiator might run into problems when coaching a slower-paced, relationship-oriented Friend - or that a cautious, process-focused Thinker might struggle to address performance problems with a fast-paced and impulsive Emoter.

But once managers recognize their own styles, they begin to understand how their behavioral preferences affect those they are trying to coach. With an awareness of how others perceive them, managers can learn to control the work-style behaviors that may get in the way of effective communication.

In the previous example, the Friend manager not only learned to understand his direct report's Initiator style, but also how his own style affected how he coached everyone on his team.

For example, he had a simple insight: He lacked directness. He was very approachable and easy to talk with, but he hesitated to give direct feedback that would help his people with their performance. After realizing this about himself, he learned to step out of his comfort zone and provide concrete recommendations to the people he coached.

This type of eye-opening experience is common for coaches who learn about work styles, and HR leaders can realize significant improvement in the coaching abilities of leaders by including such education in their programs.

### Identifying Work Styles

How can managers know which behaviors they should control or modulate? By knowing the work style of those they are coaching. Surprisingly, it's often easier to identify someone else's work style than one's own. While formal training in work-style preferences is ideal, managers can use their powers of observation

of both verbal and non-verbal clues to help them identify others' work styles:

- \* **Don't jump to conclusions.** Multiple observations in a variety of circumstances will provide the most accurate assessment.
- \* **Remain objective.** Feelings toward a person are independent of his or her work style and behaviors. Similarly, "like" or "dislike" judgments about work styles are not helpful.
- \* **Do not confuse work style with assigned authority or roles.** Just because a person is a supervisor does not make them an Initiator. Nor are all engineers Thinkers. Rely on observations, not stereotypes or job titles.
- \* **A little bit of stress clarifies work style.** When people experience some tension, they typically fall into the patterns of behavior that are most familiar to them and are easier to identify.
- \* **Get out of the way.** It's easier to observe someone while watching an interaction rather than being involved in it.

It would have been easy for the Friend manager to jump to conclusions about his Initiator employee. In fact, this is the first thing he did. He interpreted her behavior as unnecessarily competitive and obstinate.

It wasn't until he learned to separate her natural work style from his own judgments that he was able to relate more effectively with her. The upshot was a more amiable relationship between the two.

### **Making Coaching Individual-Specific**

In their book entitled *The Extraordinary Leader*, John Zenger and Joseph Folkman point out that people have set preferences for the way they want to receive coaching. In order for coaching to be effective, managers need to understand how an employee's work-style preferences will affect the interaction.

For instance, an Initiator will not appreciate chit-chatting about personal life or roundabout explanations. To coach an Initiator appropriately and effectively, managers should be direct, clearly state opinions and use time efficiently.

The focus should be on what needs to be accomplished, backed up with facts, logic and alternatives. Managers should look for opportunities to let the Initiator make decisions.

Emoters like stimulating experiences, so managers should schedule engaging interaction into the coaching time. Emoters also respond to how their various options will benefit them, so managers need to clearly spell that out.

This work style needs help making decisions and developing an organized plan to achieve a decided-on goal. Following up with the person to check on progress is also advised.

For an effective coaching session with a Friend work style, managers should take a friendly, personable approach. Friend types need to feel that managers care about their development and that the relationship is secure.

Open-ended questions are the best strategy, enabling this work style to freely share. Once agreement has been reached, decisions should be confirmed in order to ensure commitment.

Thinkers will get the greatest benefit from coaching sessions if managers are prepared with accurate and specific information. Managers should also prepare for the session by understanding and being able to present the pros and cons of different ideas.

Thinkers don't focus much on feelings or opinions, so managers should be straightforward and business-like, and be focused on moving the discussion to

a logical conclusion.

It may seem like a stretch for an Emoter manager to remain business-like and stick to the facts, or for a Thinker manager to encourage quick decision-making, and it will be -- at first.

Becoming a context-specific coach requires adaptability and perseverance, but work-style awareness can be learned, practiced and improved. It's a soft skill that pays off in better coaching, better team leading, greater engagement, higher productivity and less conflict.

HR leaders should be prepared to reinforce learning about work styles. Resources such as style "tips of the day" and brief one-sheet overviews of strategies for coaching each style are effective ways of helping leaders learn and utilize style for coaching.

Awareness of work-style preferences provides a sort of "power boost" that improves the effectiveness of communications and increases the productivity of coaching efforts. Work-style awareness helps managers conduct the kind of robust one-on-one coaching that produces change and unleashes employee potential.

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