

Coaching and the Power of Self-Assessment in a Customer Experience Environment

Abstract: While virtually everyone would agree that coaching is a powerful way to build talent and engage employees in a customer experience environment, there is a surprisingly large variance in the definition of coaching and its intended use. In this article we provide a definition, outline a model for an effective coaching conversation, and highlight the importance of self-assessment in coaching.

Coaching seems to have come of age in businesses today. Seen as a simple, effective way to build talent (critical as organizations emerge from a crippling economy) and engage employees (key to retaining top talent), coaching is a perennially hot topic in management and leadership development circles. The problem is that for many, coaching isn't working.

Organizations or business units with a predominant focus on customer experience will especially benefit from an update to their coaching culture. Often, employees directly interacting with customers — either on the phone, in person, or via online chat or email — are personable, eager to learn, and motivated, making them highly coachable. And — because of the customer-centric nature of their work — taking customer experience employees from good to great with a strategic coaching initiative will reap immediate, tangible, and bottom-line benefits.

Coaching Defined

For some, the problem is the definition of coaching — coaching may be seen as a “kinder, gentler” way of telling someone to shape up or else: “John’s slacking off again, so I guess it’s time for another coaching session...” Certainly, as manager you need to address John’s unacceptable performance and help raise it to at least acceptable, but that’s a corrective action (or performance improvement or problem solving) conversation, NOT coaching ... at least how we define it. Coaching is used to take acceptable — even good — performance to GREAT! It’s tapping into the talent that many of your better performers wish to release — and who want your help in doing so.

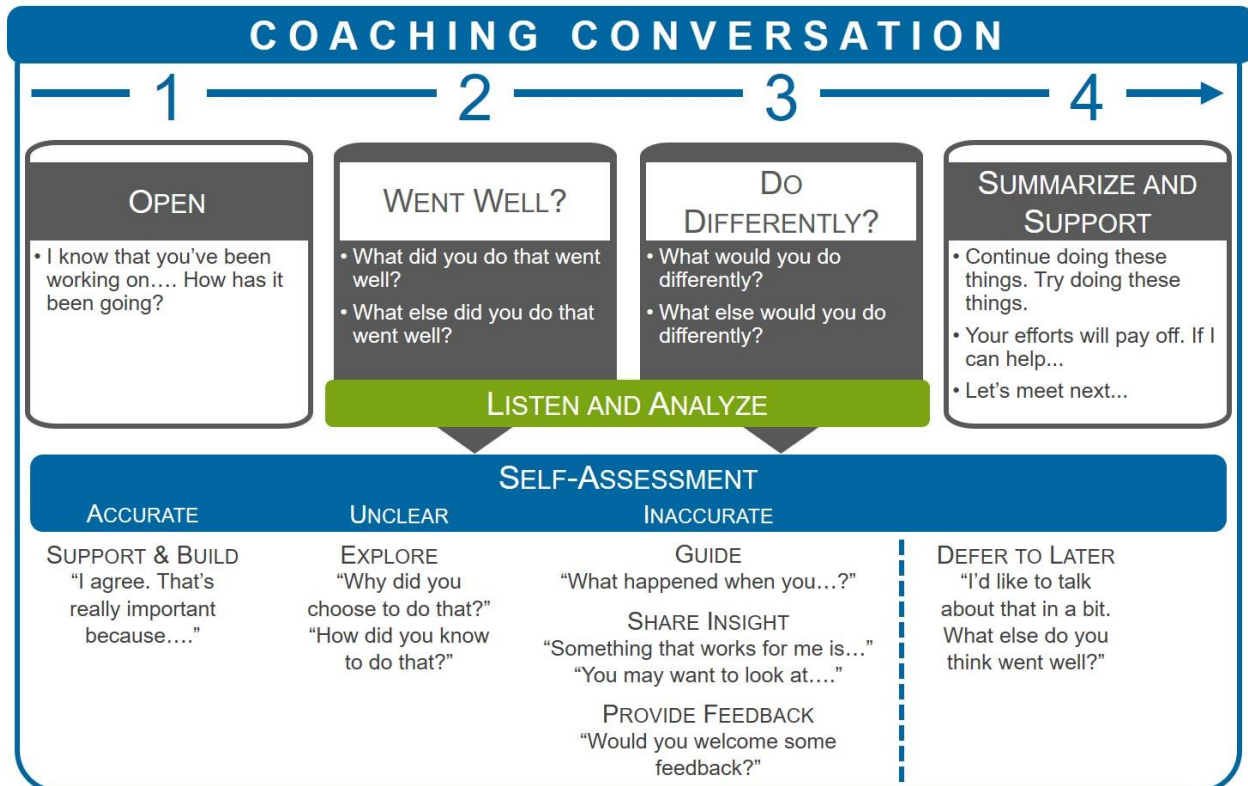
As managers, we tend to focus our attention on performance problems; with the limited time we have, that’s natural. However, that leaves those who DON’T need immediate attention — our bread and butter performers — left starving for growth and developmental opportunities. Coaching is for THOSE employees — who have both the willingness and the potential to grow and develop.

Developing this untapped and eager talent pool will be the best thing you’ve ever done as a manager and leader. If you do it right, that is.

A Simple Coaching Model

Ask any manager if coaching is important and 99 times out of 100 you'll get a resounding, "ABSOLUTELY!" Ask any manager why they don't coach more (or at all) and the answer is usually, "I don't have time."

Coaching MUST be simple and efficient or managers won't do it. Having created leadership and management development programs for hundreds of companies over 25+ years, Entelechy has refined its coaching model to address the manager's need for simplicity and efficiency.



As you can see in the model, the manager/coach guides the conversation by asking questions. In fact, there are really only three core questions that the manager/coach asks:

- 1) "I know that you've been working on your [job-related skill] since we last got together two weeks ago; how has that been going?"
- 2) "Regarding [the job-related skill], what went well?"
- 3) "Regarding [the job-related skill], what might you have done differently to have been even more effective?"

While there are nuances, Entelechy's Coaching Model has as its core only three questions making it simple to apply and easy to personalize. Importantly, the model also leverages what we know about developing adults, which makes it extremely effective.

Coaching Ain't Telling

There are many reasons that asking questions to guide the conversation is more effective than telling. Adults, when they are told how to improve, often react by rationalizing why they did what they did or discounting the advice. Most employees know what they did well and what they could do differently; telling them what they already know doesn't really help them improve. When we as adults come up with our own developmental plan, we're more likely to buy-in and implement the plan.

The reason asking questions is so effective in coaching is because questions help develop one of the most powerful muscles we as adults have — self-assessment. Only by asking questions will the manager/coach know if the employee knows what he did well and what he might do to make things even better.

For example, let's say that a call center agent is striving to improve her call skills and reduce her average handle time (AHT). The coaching conversation might sound like the following:

Coach (opening performance probe): Mary, I know that you've been working on your call skills — specifically those related to reducing your AHT — since we met two weeks ago, and you've had a chance to take a significant number of calls. How have the calls been going?

Mary: Overall, I think it's been going pretty well!

Coach (first "what went well" question): Great! What's been going well?

Mary: Well, I really focused on listening more closely. While it may sound counter-intuitive, but by listening closely we've avoided unnecessary repetitive discussion and it's cut my time.

Coach (supporting and building an accurate self-assessment): That's a great insight! And not only are you saving time, by actively listening, you're showing the customer you really care. And that helps improve NPS.

Coach (second "what went well" question): What else have you done that has helped improve your AHT?

Mary: Hmm... Well, I've found that the script is really useful, especially when I make it my own. I'm able to follow the conversation without wasting time deviating AND without sounding like a robot.

Coach (supporting and building an accurate self-assessment): Super! I know that we often see the script as somewhat stifling, but it was created with efficiency in mind. The fact that you made it your own adds effectiveness to that efficiency!

Coach (first "do differently" question): Thinking over the last two weeks, what might you have done differently to further reduce AHT while maintaining a high level of customer service?

Mary: Well, I'm still challenged with using the system fully while I'm talking. I feel that I'm either talking or listening OR using the system. I want to use the system more naturally.

Coach (supporting and building an accurate self-assessment): Yeah, I agree. Using the system efficiently will certainly reduce your AHT AND help keep you on track during your conversations. Perhaps you want to spend 15 minutes watching Jeff since he is a star at using the system during his calls.

Coach (second “do differently” question): In addition to using the system more efficiently, what else might you have done differently to further reduce AHT?

Mary: Hmmm... Well, I think that I want to focus on closing the call more effectively without sounding rushed or forced. Sometimes I’ll add a little chit chat in now that we’ve resolved the issue and I know it hurts AHT.

Coach (supporting and building an accurate self-assessment): That’s a great self-assessment; I heard that same thing on a couple of the recorded calls. Your extending the conversation not only added to the AHT, I’m not sure it added anything to the call quality; in fact, in at least one case, the customer seemed a bit annoyed. So, I agree: focus on ending the call courteously and quickly.

Coach (summarizing and supporting): Mary, you’re doing a great job lowering your AHT! Keep up the active listening and using the script to keep you on track. Over the next two weeks, focus on using the system more efficiently and on closing the conversation more efficiently without unnecessarily chit-chat time. Reach out to Jeff to get some tips on using the system and, if you’d like to touch base before our next coaching session, I’m here. I love the progress you’re making!

Method to the Madness

Note that we ask the questions in a specific order. By asking “what went well” questions first, we create a positive coaching environment. And by asking for what went well, we ensure that we identify the behaviors/skills we want repeated. By asking “what would you do differently” questions last, we leave the coachee with the developmental priorities fresh in mind. Note also that by asking each question twice, we force the coachee to dig deeper in their self-assessment. We’ve found that the first response is often obvious; the second response usually requires a bit more reflection.

By asking questions, we’re able to determine what our employees need from us. If Mary didn’t know how to use the system, we could share some insights or — as we did — suggest she shadow a colleague. If she didn’t pick up on the fact that some customers were getting frustrated by extra conversation at the end, we could have offered her tips to help her gauge the mood of the caller. The only way to discover what the coachee knows or doesn’t know is by asking questions and listening.

Of Course, There’s More to It

The great thing about the coaching questions is that they are easy to use outside of formal coaching sessions. For example, when you’re debriefing a recently completed project with the team, you may ask, “So, how do we feel the project went? What went well? What might have we done to make the project even more successful?”

Most importantly, by developing the self-assessment muscle through the use of the coaching questions, you'll find your employees asking the questions of themselves without your prodding. And isn't that what we're all looking for — engaged employees improving their performance and contributing in increasingly meaningful ways to the success of the team and the organization?

About the Author

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