The Powerful Act of Coaching Employees

There are some tasks we can take care of once a year, like paying taxes or going to the doctor for our annual checkup. Then there are other tasks we need to perform more often, sometimes even daily. Ensuring superb performance from all of our employees falls into the latter category, especially during times of economic turbulence. Fortunately, managing (or coaching) employees so they can perform at the highest levels is more enjoyable than most annual tasks and it results in increased organizational value.

All organizations are striving to improve employee productivity in order to grow overall business performance and corporate value. But the tool we most often use to improve performance - the performance review - really isn't capable of helping us reach our overall goal. The reasons for its failure are numerous; but, its biggest flaw is that it is the equivalent of looking in the rearview mirror to see where the employee has been and perhaps failed. Why not look ahead, through the windshield, to see where the employee can successfully go? Additionally, since performance reviews occur once a year, if at all, they require us to look back over a long period of time. Any corrective solutions generally are too late to do any good.

Here is a helpful idea - coach early and often. Coach early to catch potential problems before they happen and often because continuous interest and feedback virtually guarantee better performance. Coaching employees provides counsel in real time and clearly identifies goals in the context of the employee's job. Good coaches understand the current reality of the employee's world and are aware of issues that might prevent a worker from reaching his or her goals. Good coaching provides the development strategies that allow an employee to achieve his or her goals.

The Powerful Act of Coaching - How do we get there from here?

How do we make the transition from once-a-year reviews and appraisals to an atmosphere of coaching? First, take a look at today's annual performance practices and why they aren't always the best. Then determine the steps necessary to progress in the right direction.

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What is wrong with the performance review and how can we fix it?

Typically an annual event, the review is founded on good motives. It stems from a desire to equitably rate employees based on their performance and potential. Managers often use this information to implement consistency. This intent is fine, but the results often leave much to be desired. An annual performance review fails to produce the same results as performance coaching for the following reasons:

- **Painful comparisons** - Some performance appraisals are comparative, ranking employees against each other based on performance. This encouragement of competition works for some groups some of the time - sales employees, perhaps - but it's time to rethink this approach due to shifting work values, talent shortages, and the need for innovation.

- **Lack of consistency** – Many, if not most, managers consider performance appraisals a painful process that lacks consistency. They don't like it, so they rush through the appraisal, squeezing what should be a 45 minute session into 5 or 10 minutes and they often do not say what they mean. At their best, performance appraisals are supposed to give the employee a chance to offer feedback. This does not work if the manager is hurrying to get it over with or if the employee is too stunned to offer any response.

- **Surprise, surprise** - The person on the receiving end, hungry for feedback that he or she has not received on an on-going basis, often - if at all - might discover the tasks he or she performed weren't the ones the manager wanted done. Or she may discover she left out an essential step no one ever told her about when starting the job. Or that something she had said in a joking manner months ago misled or offended another employee. Performance coaching would have helped the manager address problems when they occur.

Take Steps toward Performance Coaching
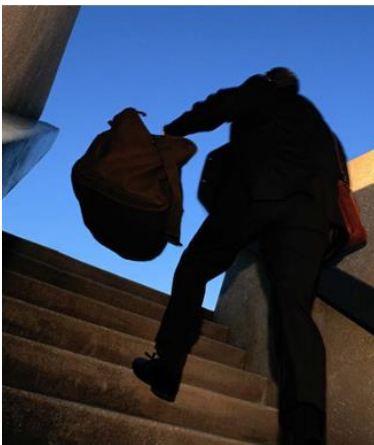
First, we have to acknowledge that good performance rarely happens by accident. When we hire or promote someone who has a solid work history, too often we let the new employee jump right in the job with little thought to job training, job coaching, or even job fit. Ninety percent of 1,000 people interviewed last year believe leaders have little, if any, influence over employee behavior. This is not surprising since too many leaders often view on-going performance coaching as unnecessary. They view it much as they do the annual performance review - a chore they need to do once every 365 days. If they could avoid the appraisal altogether, they would. Benign neglect is not the path to great results.

Second, leaders need to replace the old system with a new one. Instituting this new system requires examining corporate culture and management strategy. This begins at the top, where cultural changes happen. It starts with the organization's leaders clearly stating what the new system is - essentially defining and describing it - putting the plan in writing and then modeling the behavior. These steps will help managers buy in to the new system which is necessary if actual changes are to occur.

Third, the new system needs to be checked and rechecked. If you put a system in place and just expect that everything will be all right, you might be surprised by what is not all right. Busy managers sometimes cut corners letting certain tasks or deadlines slide. Before long, others are mimicking their behavior. The system you put in place stops working, or never worked at all, because managers are not using it consistently. Always inspect what you expect.

The Common Threads of Coaching and Development

Bersin & Associates, experts in educating organizations about talent management, found these seven processes ensure the best performance management:

- Goal-setting

- Alignment of performance goals with organizational goals

- Employee self-assessments

- 360-degree assessments

- Manager appraisals

- Competency assessments

- Development planning

Do you see the common threads of coaching and development? Studies show that coaching delivers major results, offering 150 percent greater return on investment than performance appraisals. You read that correctly - 150 percent! With that number in mind, coupled with the dread almost everyone feels regarding performance appraisals, why isn't everyone coaching? Perhaps because they are not clear about how or when to do it.

In the performance appraisal process, the manager "coaches" in order to fix an issue after it has been identified in the appraisal. But what if the system provided for such feedback from the beginning? If we use feedback and development as tools to drive success instead of fixing problems, we have success from the start. It's an easier way to teach and a more positive way to learn. Further, if such coaching takes place regularly, as it should, and is tailored to the employee and the specific job, it becomes part of the weave of an organization's culture.

It is important for coaches to remember that one size does not fit all. Each employee is different, and employees work differently. The better the manager/coach understands the employee, the more effective the coaching and the results, the more engaged and productive the employee, and the less turnover there will be.

Essential Management Coaching Skills

How do you transform managers into coaches? As noted earlier, building and changing the corporate culture begins at the top when business leaders adopt a system, define the system, and model the system. Top leaders coach managers to be the kind of leaders the organization wants (and needs) now and in the future. Two of the management coaching skills include:

- The ability to identify people who fit the job

- The ability to create strategies for employee development that inspire people to perform and achieve

These competencies set the foundation for development; but, even the most able manager requires help in these areas. No manager is equipped with essential knowledge about every employee and successful coaching requires specialized knowledge about:

- Each employee's unique characteristics

- Each employee's attributes in the context of his/her job and in the context of the environment

- Each employee's fit to his/her job, manager and teams

The Five Elements of Successful Coaching

1. Jot Fit

The first key component in knowing the employee or job candidate is job fit and that is best revealed by comparing their characteristics against those of known top performers in the role. If you list in one column what you know about this individual (let's call her Sarah), you'll likely list her educational credentials, the companies she worked for in the past, and the different jobs she performed. Her history may suggest she'll fit the job. But the differences between top and average performers come down to more than just experience. They include such things as:

- How well they make decisions and how assertive they are when working with others?

- What motivates them and how will they respond to stressful situations?

- How compatible will they be with their manager and their work teams?

- How effective will they be as a leader?
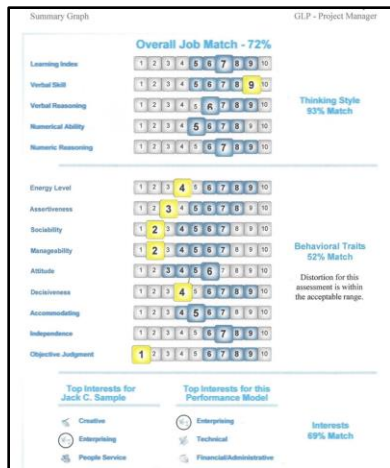
A Profile showing gaps for an individual against a specific performance model

If Sarah lacks some of these attributes and if top performers in the role have them, Sarah may not necessarily be a bad fit for the job; but, it's obvious there are some gaps. However, once you've identified the gaps, you can also determine where Sarah may need coaching for improved work performance. Managers do not have to pull these attributes from thin air. A core competency assessment such as the PXT Select (shown on the left) will provide a comparison across 20 "top performer" traits in the areas of thinking style, behavioral traits, and occupational interests.

Gaps indicate potential "discomfort zones" that simply means that the employee or job candidate may have ability to behave in way that the job requires; but, by doing so may be outside their comfort zone and this could be stressful for both them and everyone else involved with that work team. The role of the coach is to understand where these gaps occur and to help the individual bridge those gaps. The job fit assessment also measures thinking style, behavioral traits and occupational interests; compares candidates to job-specific patterns in order to predict future success; and provides a foundation for ongoing employee performance management.

2. Motivation

A key role of the coach is to help employees such as Sarah sail successfully through company turbulence; items such as turnover, budget reductions, and doing more with fewer people. It's crucial that coaches understand how each employee will react to the everyday "chills and thrills" roller coaster ride at work. Will a discussion about budget cuts in their department send Sarah into a door-slamming fit? If Sarah has to work with a new team on a project that requires their specific capabilities, how will she handle the change?
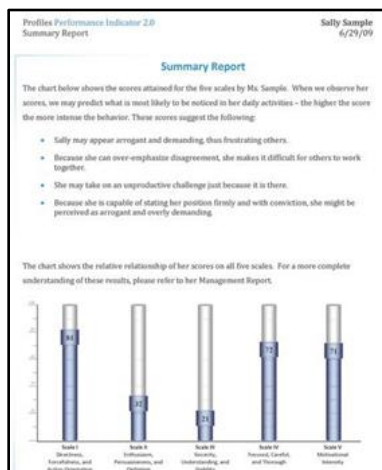

If Sarah handles multiple tasks and is comfortable in a fast-paced environment, will she balk at participating on a team which is more deliberate? Or, if she is known for precision and careful decision-making, she might need suggestions on how to fit in an environment in which members finish several projects a week and juggle multiple tasks at one time. The Profiles Performance Indicator assessment will measure her:

- Need for control
- Social influence
- Patience and ability to be a team player
- Focus on precision and quality
- Motivational intensity and focus on change

Knowing these things about Sarah will help the manager/coach understand how to motivate her and how she will respond under stress. The coaching report provides specific guidance for increasing performance.

3. Chemistry with the Manager

So far we have looked at Sarah and what motivates her, but it's just as important to look at how she will fit into the larger community. Relationships have an important impact on productivity and they can create gains for the team and the organization. In order to make the most of these relationships, we have to identify potential conflict points in these relationships and understand how to avoid such issues. Knowing what to say and how to say it makes everything else possible.
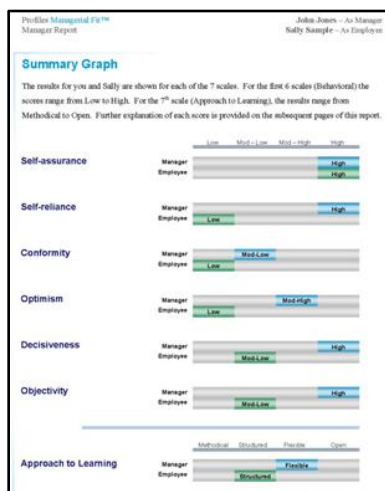
The Manager-Employee report of the PXT Select assessment provides specific recommendations regarding how the manager/coach and the employee can most effectively talk to one another and how to work with each other. More specifically, this step:

- Examines the working relationship between employee and manager in order to predict compatibility
- Identifies similarities and differences in styles and how they may result in conflict
- Provides specific recommendations for managers and employees so they can best work together to improve performance

Many employees quit their jobs due to a bad relationship with their manager or boss. Although there are many situational factors that can cause conflict in any work relationship, there are certain characteristics and behavioral tendencies that, if identified, can be used to enhance relationships, communication, and management coaching styles. An assessment such as the PXT Select provide information that will help each manager understand his or her employees and increase overall productivity.

4. Chemistry with the Team

Although work teams are often informal groups, they are both ubiquitous and essential to the completion of most projects. Few employees are individual contributors to such projects. For example, Sarah might come up with a great idea for a sales campaign that involves several departments. This means she will need to present the idea to both her own department head and to other department heads and she will need help to do so. She might enlist such aid from a team she already works with or she might need to create a brand new group that can help with research, writing, graphic design, and organizational and speaking skills in order to get the idea ready to be presented.

Team Balance Table

Bravo Team Members

* Sally Sample - Team Leader
2. James Jones
3. Sheryl Masker
4. Tammy Wheser

12 Factors	Low	Mod/Low	Moderate	Mod/High	High
Control	*	3	2	4	
Social Influence		4	*	2,3	
Patience		2	3,4	*	
Precision			2,3,4	*	
Ambition	*		2,4	3	
Positive Expectancy		3	2,4	*	
Composure			2,3	*,4	
Analytical		*,2,3,4			
Results Orientation		4	2	*,3	
Expressiveness		*	3,4	2	
Team Player			2,3,4	*	
Quality Orientation		3	*	2,4	

The team will have its own dynamics, communication, and good attitudes about working together. This will be critical to its success. All team members will have to buy into Sarah's ideas, so she may need the help of a coach/manager to determine the behavioral and working characteristics of team members and to identify potential strengths and weaknesses.

The image to the left shows a Team Balance Report from the Profiles Team Analysis. The Team Balance Report helps managers identify the presence or absence of characteristics that are essential for achieving success as a team.

Some of the things the coach must know about the team include:

- Are its members - and Sarah - workers who need to be in control?

- What characteristics is the team lacking?

- How do we avoid or resolve potential conflicts?

Knowing these things in advance and putting the right team together will ensure that Sarah's idea is presented well.

5. Leadership Ability

The last step in coaching-based performance management helps determine whether Sarah has leadership ability. To learn this, we examine her through the prism of eight specific leadership competencies and 18 skill sets as measured by the CheckPoint 360°. These include:

- Communication - How well does she process information and listen to others?

- Leadership ability - Does she instill trust, provide direction, and delegate responsibility?

- Adaptability - How well does she adjust to circumstances? Does she think creatively?

- Relationship building - Is she effective at establishing personal relationships and helping her team succeed?

- Task management - How efficiently and competently does she work?

- Production - Does Sarah act, or does she wait? Does she get results?

- Development of others - Does she cultivate the talents of others and successfully motivate them?

- Personal development - Does she demonstrate commitment and seek improvement?
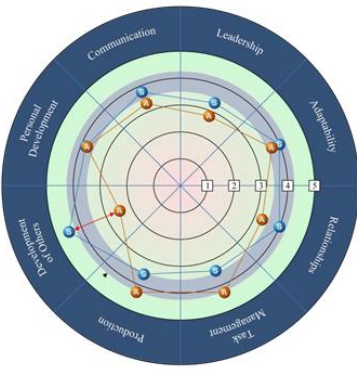
The image above is a graphic from Profiles' CheckPoint 360°™ assessment. The chart compares an employee's self-evaluation and his or her co-workers evaluation according to eight universal management competencies.

Once the manager/coach has the answers to these questions (shown in the summary chart of the CheckPoint 360° to the left), he or she will know Sarah well. The full report will not only identify areas of strengths and areas for focus, it will give them specific recommendations and strategies to help them develop Sarah's leadership skills.

Getting the best performance from employees anytime – but especially during periods of great economic performance or during periods of downturns - is ultimately the responsibility of the leaders of an organization. Once a manager/coach discovers the value of coaching early and often, he or she will see how a looking-through-the-windshield approach is far more effective than looking backward at what has gone wrong during the last year.

The most effective approach requires:

- Coaching tailored to the individual with the goal of increasing productivity
- Coaching and development based on insight about the employee's competencies within the context of the job, and working with her team and her manager

Summary – Coaching Makes a Difference

Many organizations rely on annual performance evaluations to make important decisions concerning the future of employees and their future role in the organization. The evaluation is based on events that happened in the past and is usually standardized across the organization. Important decisions are made in meetings that often last less than half an hour. There is an alternative to using a performance evaluation that will help increase productivity through consistent feedback and encouragement - Coaching. Performance evaluations often look at problems or issues that happened in the past that could have been prevented with coaching. Coaching is a consistent and reliable management style that creates an open line of communication and an opportunity for growth.

To make the transition from annual performance evaluations to an atmosphere of coaching, organizations need to:

1. Realize the flawed nature of the performance appraisals

2. Take the steps to get out of your current situation

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3. Identify the common threads of coaching and development

4. Learn to identify job fit and specialized knowledge about employees

5. Determine job fit and compatibility with co-workers

Making the transition from performance evaluations to performance coaching can be an uphill battle. Using tools - such as the assessments referred to in this white paper - to help identify behavioral tendencies of employees can help managers learn how to coach well. Coaching not only changes the culture of an organization, but it increases performance and leads to a significant return on investment.