

Constructive Criticism for Managers

A growing number of managers are open to feedback from their direct reports, but “coaching up” isn’t always easy. **BY MICHAEL ROSENTHAL**



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Q Our organization touts the value of “coaching up,” yet our employees find it difficult to give their managers constructive feedback. What do you do when it’s the boss who needs coaching in a certain area? How can a direct report achieve the results he or she wants?

A: In order for coaching up to be maximally embraced and effective, employees should begin by getting their manager’s buy-in. Start by sharing the reasons for wanting to engage the coaching process. Company policy memos that underscore the importance of coaching up help avoid possible misinterpretation of employee motives—i.e., the direct report simply wants to conform to policy and to improve workplace performance, not express his or her gripes.

Find out the manager’s view and definition of coaching up. What are his or her expectations? What is the best way for criticism and advice to be delivered to him or her (e.g., in the moment vs. afterward in a moment of calm)? The employee also should share his or her own views, definitions, and expectations with the manager, and the two parties should have a meeting of the minds on these things before any coaching is rendered.

Unfortunately, some managers simply are not receptive to coaching. If, after having the exploratory conversation, it becomes clear that this manager is not open to feedback and advice from those junior to him or her, the direct report might be wise to turn his or her energies elsewhere.

That said, a growing number of managers are open to feedback from their direct reports, aware that they can learn from just about anyone in the organization, and, in turn, become even better leaders. In these situations, direct reports have an opportunity—perhaps even a responsibility—to help their bosses and

organizations improve. Some tips:

As with any coaching situation, the coach should be sensitive. Like all coachees, supervisors have feelings and vulnerabilities, so care must be taken when delivering any feedback that might be interpreted critically. Express empathy and avoid using the

word, “but.” Instead, use “and.” For example, “I know you were under a lot of pressure to get the report done in time for the meeting. *And* I think that, even in those times of crisis, there could be a better way of communicating.”

Be careful to avoid globalizing a behavior and characterizing it as a pattern. For example, if the supervisor is generally good at time management but runs up against the clock for meetings outside of the office, be sure to focus the feedback on both the general rule, as well as on the subject of criticism. For example, “While you’re generally very good at time management, it seems you risk being late for those meetings outside the office.”

Give examples and use specific data whenever possible. Once the example and data are shared, ask the supervisor how he or she understands the data and explains the example. The manager might see things differently or might have additional data that could affect the assessment and feedback.

Introduce ideas of how you can help the manager get better—how you can function as his or her coach. Remember, coaching is more than offering feedback. It also should involve taking part in the solution. Also, ask the supervisor for ideas on how you could be the most effective coach for him or her.

Last, be sure to check in to see if the coaching is working. If it isn’t achieving the desired results, it might be time to sit down with the manager and analyze what’s standing in the way and to explore other options for improving the behavior. **T**