

# “Coaching sure fire way to achieve goals”



Coaching can provide a much-needed hand to those who either want to improve their own performance or that of their team. There is a very distinct difference between a coach and a mentor so here are some suggestions as to what a coach needs to do if (s)he is to be effective.

- 1 **Coaching needs a structured approach:** So, as a coach, you will need to:
  - **Agree the topic/issue to be addressed:** The topic could be a pressing need has arisen because the department is expanding or contracting and these changing circumstances expose coaching or development needs. Or it could be there is a change in direction the organisation has to face. Again other coaching opportunities could arise as the coach is carrying out the coaching.
  - **Identify and agree the goals:** These can be either long or short-term, with the former representing the solution to a problem or the development of a skill. The latter is the goal associated with the coaching session and these should be written in SMART terminology. The ideal scenario would be if the employee came up with the problem him/herself as in this way (s)he would be much more committed and very determined to get a successful outcome.
  - **Use your process skills:** Key to this is your ability to firstly be a good listener, and then ask probing but not intimidating questions (the use of the 5 “w’s” and the “h” is an excellent way to do this) and lastly use/share your experience to help the employee consider the various options. Remember experience cannot be taught to someone, but you can use it to give confidence to someone undertaking a new (and often) threatening role and to demonstrate lessons learnt from similar projects or indeed mistakes.
  - **Agree the action plan:** Once you have agreed the topic, discussed the options and shared experiences you need to set out the action plan. This will be even more effective if the employee suggests the plan including the target times and then agrees the outcomes that will be expected. By doing so you will be able to monitor progress and set the parameters for the next coaching session. Remember it is vital that all agreed action points are committed to paper.
  - **Ensure the employee is empowered:** There is nothing worse than to motivate the employee at the coaching session (and this is a real danger) so much that (s)he rushes off and begins to act without the authority to make things happen. So the coach needs to ensure that the employee is authorised to do the work that has been agreed and has, for example, ready access to information, administrative support and the use of transport if needed. Colleagues must also co-operate fully.

- **Recap before closing each session:** This is so easy to forget and can create credibility problems as the coaching tries to gain momentum. So you must make sure that everything is made crystal clear and a good way to ensure this is to ask the employee to repeat his/her understanding of what has been agreed. As (s)he does so you should make a record of the action points ensuring they are Specific; Measurable; Achievable; Realistic and Time bound.
- 2 **A structured approach needs key skills:** The first skill, if the structured approach is to be successful, is the ability to actively listen. This involves:
- **Knowing when to be quiet:** It is quite natural to want to interrupt someone or to finish their sentence for them, particularly if you think you are being of some help. To do this in a coaching session will however only interrupt the train of thought, confuse and embarrass the person. Your role is to allow the person to work out the solution and this will be made all the more difficult if you keep interrupting. So let the person finish and only provide advice and suggestion if the person is stuck.
  - **Being non-judgemental:** Another natural inclination is to tell someone their ideas are flawed or that what they are proposing to do is wrong. This will almost certainly destroy his/her confidence and their creativity. What you need to do is to create a non-threatening environment which will encourage the person to brainstorm, particularly those ideas that may be “off-the-wall”, with the confidence that you are going to react in a positive and constructive way. So actively listen by being non-judgemental.
  - **Repeat key messages:** When a person makes a valid point or a point that you consider to be important then repeat what’s been said – in your own words. This will show that you listened and understood what has been said. If you don’t understand then ask questions until you do and then paraphrase it. Once the person realises that you have been, and actively are listening then it will become increasingly unnecessary to repeat what has been said. A simple “yes” or a nod will suffice.

The second skill, if the structured approach is to be successful, is the ability to ask relevant and pertinent questions. There are three types of question you can use:

- **Clarifying questions:** These questions are intended to generate specific information. For example “Why did you adopt option A, rather than option B?”
- **Creative questions:** These questions are intended to probe the creative part of the person’s mind and open him/her to new possibilities. For example “Have you seen this working elsewhere?”

- **Procedural questions:** These questions are intended to allow you to ensure that the coaching session remains structured. For example “Would you have the authority to do what you are suggesting?”

While the real aim of coaching is to draw out ideas, this does not mean that you cannot put forward your own ideas and thoughts. But the timing is the vital thing to remember and if you follow what is suggested above then your ideas have a good chance of being seen as additional ideas. But this takes experience as well as skills and this is one of the key missing ingredients in what we seem today to call “Coaching”. Maybe this is why coaching has not yet been embraced as it should in Northern Ireland.