

For Managers, Principals, Team Leaders and Internal Consultants
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Issue No 14: The essence of coaching

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The essence of coaching

In my work I am often privileged to observe the most beautiful metamorphosis in the people I work with. It may be a quite unassuming person who blossoms, or someone who has been behaving in a resistant, unconfident or maybe somewhat immature manner suddenly start to shine and become every bit the manager and leader their manager thought possible.

This happened in the work that I did with Nina and her manager Doug. The metamorphosis culminated in a meeting we had before the launch of a new structure. What I saw was, what I believe, is the essence of coaching and leadership and so very important in managing in today's workplace. In this report I will try to describe what transpired and what the key lessons were for me.

Background

About 3 years ago I met Doug, the managing director of a very successful and profitable company. Doug asked me to work with him and his team as they were experiencing unusually high absenteeism. I worked with them for several months and in the months following this work, the absenteeism fell away and the team of 26 operators was more motivated and engaged.

Last year Doug asked me to work with his team again. He wanted to restructure the team to allow both the business and his team members to prosper and grow. In particular, one exceptional team member, Nina, had become so indispensable and her role so large and all-encompassing that the growth and success of the business was limited by how much it was humanly possible for Nina to get through.

Although Nina was highly capable and well respected, it was ironic that her individual success was actually stifling the growth of both the business and other team members.

Doug was keen to involve all staff in the change process so we conducted surveys and interviews with all staff to gather information, and then used this at a planning weekend we held with the management team. Decisions were made on strategic direction, goals and objectives, and structure.

The new structure meant that Nina was being given less responsibility in some areas and a more defined role with more responsibility in two key areas. Nina went along with the new structure, however, it was clear that she was unhappy.

A little bit of theory

Before we get into what actually happened, let me outline the process of change that I have found particularly useful in my work. Change is easy. Like in Doug's company, you restructure a company and allocate new roles in a weekend. What is more challenging, however, is transitioning people from the old roles to the new roles – and the new behaviours expected. Bridges, in his book, *Managing Organisational Transition*, says:

“... change occurs when something starts or stops; it can be planned and managed. Transition is a three part psychological process ...it cannot be managed by the same rational formulae.”

The three phases of change are:

1. The 'ending phase' – acknowledging the past and letting go
2. The “neutral zone” – this is the uncomfortable area where there is confusion and some grieving over loss and/or change
3. The “new beginning” – embracing the new

Many organisations do not handle **transition** well. Most managers think about a change for many months before it is actually discussed or announced, so for them, they are instantly ready to go to phase 3, and sometimes can't understand why their team members aren't on board with them. This lack of management understanding and acceptance that change is a process, often leads to team members feeling disenfranchised, confused and in some cases even resigning.

The meeting with Nina and Doug

After the weekend away we worked with all of the managers for several months to transition them into their new roles – this included Nina. We had many meetings with people about taking up their new roles and dealt with their concerns.

Nina was still upset about having some of her role taken away. She was getting on with her day but was feeling lost (In the neutral zone). We were ready to announce the new structure to the whole company and hoped, as Nina's role had changed and she was a well-respected manager, that she would speak at the launch. It would be an opportunity to acknowledge her contribution as well as give authority and a level of comfort to the newly

appointed managers. Initially, Nina refused outright and had many reasons and excuses for not speaking.

This is the critical point at which Doug, her manager, showed the type of attitude and behaviour that I think makes him an excellent leader, manager and coach. He talked to Nina calmly but without trying to change her mind, make her 'see reason' or force her to do something she didn't want to do. He talked to her about the enormous contribution she had made until now, (acknowledging the past), and explained that without her doing her role over the last 10 years, the company would not be as successful as it is today. She had created her role and made it work brilliantly and now the business had grown to a point where things needed to change for everyone's benefit. He also pointed out the opportunities she had to create something similar within her new role and to take her leadership to another level.

After a while Nina started to feel more at ease and revealed her own fear of getting up to speak. We then changed the focus of the conversation to supporting Nina to become a stronger leader by challenging her fears.

We told her that if she wanted to be a leader, she had to act like one. We explained to her the high value in the team hearing from her rather than only the senior management team. We knew people would look to her to see whether they themselves would be fully behind the new structure or not. We pointed out to Nina that this was a time her team needed her to be there for them and that is what leaders do in times of change and transition.

Nina thought for a few moments and then started to ask questions about what types of things she might say. Eventually she agreed that she would speak.

Nina spoke at the launch and did a fantastic job. She was starting to see the new beginning (phase 3) and her part in it. Nina's leadership grew in many ways on that day. She started to see past her own fears and saw the possibility of who she could be. Something Doug and myself were hoping for and delighted to see.

To Doug's credit, he stuck with her at a time when many managers would have just let the situation be. He spent more than two hours with her during that coaching conversation. He did not take calls or check his emails. He was completely focused on her and present for her. He did not give up on her and he allowed her to become something more than she initially really believed she was – a leader. Another manager may have seen her behaviour as stubborn or even childish and ended the meeting in despair. Doug saw through that and understood it was about her fears and doubts.

To me, this is the essence of being a great coach - the ability and willingness to see more in someone than they can see in themselves, and the patience to stay with them until they are able to shine.

Main takeaways

- Change is easy. It can be planned or managed.
- Transition is the hard part as you move people from the old to the new.

- It is important to have regular and on going communication to transition people from the old to the new
- Leading and coaching relies heavily on being patient and compassionate with people.
- The essence of good coaching is to see more in someone than they see in themselves – to see beyond their fears.

One doesn't discover new lands without consenting to lose sight of the shore for a very long time. Andre Gide

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