

Encouraging Performance - a new set of disciplines for Practical Leadership

By David Finney

Nick was brilliant technically but kept missing deadlines. His manager tried everything; gave him ideas, suggestions, techniques, reminders, orders; sent him emails, called him, thrashed it out in 1:1 meetings, nothing worked. Occasionally Nick would hit a deadline and then miss it again the following week. The important thing to know here is that Nick desperately wanted to please both his manager and his internal clients. There was no lack of desire, it was just that he'd get so engrossed in another task the existing deadline would be overlooked.

Then one day, the manager attended a leadership course which included a coaching model. He applied the model and something quite miraculous occurred. Towards the end of the 1:1, Nick had become animated in a way his manager had not previously seen. Next time they met Nick was beaming. He had designed a weekly planner and was using it with pride and passion. Nice story huh? It's all true. I was that manager. That's the great thing about having twenty years managerial experience, you can call on your most brilliant mistakes and greatest triumphs to maximise your learning. Read on and I will let you into the secret of effective performance management.

Practical Leadership

As managers we've have had a tendency to use catch-up meetings as a chance to air our views, give directions and point out what our reports are doing wrong. But what is it the individuals in our teams really need from us? What stops them from being fantastic at their jobs? Maybe it's us. If "people leave managers and not companies", as Marcus Buckingham concluded after 25 years of research at Gallup, this should serve as a huge reminder as to the importance of the manager role.

We've spent the last 20 years or so buzzing about the leadership word and how crucial it is for professionals to find their leadership style and demonstrate those inspirational qualities that their teams will follow. We've placed themes and concepts on the wall and have painted a broad leadership canvas to take us away from the traditional 'command and control' aspects of traditional management. All good stuff and essential to discovering our authenticity and purpose as a leader; but somewhere along the line have we forgotten about the core disciplines that underline the art of great management?

'Practical Leadership' covers both sides of the coin and achieves a new kind of balance that managers can use as their 21st century mantra. On the one side you have the expanse of leadership where leaders can find a style that suits their personality and talents; on the other lies the routines of performance management. Without effective means of managing performance inspirational words from the most charismatic of leaders will not yield results. And so building on the work of Buckingham and more recently the Appreciative Inquiry movement, managers need to pause, take stock and find a place where they and their teams

can work from a position of strength, which leads us to the first of the 6 keys to effective performance management.

1. Strengths

The first job of every manager is to conduct some appreciative enquiry and locate the strengths of the team. Should those strengths not be sufficient to achieve the goals of the department, then careful recruitment must take place where again the focus should be to recruit natural talent and elicit the strengths of the applicants and how they might be used in the organisation to maximum benefit.

When a child first learns to walk, adults rally round with shouts of joy and encouragement and the child beams with pride and determination, taking another step and then another. This basic human need for support should never be forgotten for not only is it extremely motivating but it is an approach that allows for mistakes. Falling over is simply a part of the journey.

As managers we need to make strengths a focus in the department so that when their reports forget how good they are, we won't. To remind individuals of their talents enables them to tackle their daily challenges with greater motivation so that they will be always working from a position of strength. We may even be able to park 'issues' for 10 minutes and get to start meetings with what is working and stop seeing our companies as continual problems that need fixing.

Once all strengths are on the table and the manager has explored with the team how they might be put to the greatest use, this is a good time to get clarity about roles, responsibilities and expectations. A job description does not do this alone; in fact it doesn't even get close. What is required is a strong visual message that is both affirming and transparent.

2. Enforcement areas

Have you seen Charles Handy's doughnut principle? It's a model which is very useful in determining the 'non-negotiables' of performance management. In the centre of the doughnut – the inner ring - are those elements of the working week that need full compliance without question. The manager decides which parts of someone's role need to be enforced and which are open to initiative and creative input. Defining and declaring the areas of enforcement is crucial in achieving transparency about ownership boundaries. All the 'non-negotiables' are placed in the centre of the doughnut.

This process enables managers to establish their 'tell v ask ratio'. Before starting a conversation at work with a report, it is essential to be clear: "in this situation, am I asking or telling, is this discussion to be directive or collaborative?" If the subject is in the centre, there is no negotiation: this part may contain the core of company policy: quality standards, contractual obligations, company administration and other senior management legislation. It is the manager's duty to ensure that this company policy is enforced. (Of course if someone constructively challenges the 'why' of company policy this should be taken on board and

placed in an appropriate review meeting; compliance until the review is still non-negotiable and managers should commit to the review).

The doughnut principle also teaches us that if the inner ring is too large – i.e. if too much is placed in the centre thus reducing the space in the outer ring - individuals can feel suffocated, and their creativity will be stifled. When the contents of the inner ring have been declared then a greater freedom of expression can be given to individuals in the outer ring. Once there is clarity in the rings, teams will know exactly what is required of them and where within their roles they can apply their unique talents.

The outer ring is one of enterprise and excitement. It is the place where individuals can really stake their claim in the organisation and find an authentic way of making a special contribution that adds value to the company and provides meaning to their role. In this larger zone of ownership and individual responsibility the report needs an approach that is both facilitative and empowering.

3. Coaching

“The ability to learn faster than your competitors may be the only sustainable competitive advantage” – Arie de Geus

Everything starts with a conversation and therefore the quality of that conversation determines everything. “The best leaders talk with people not at them” as Susan Scott expressed poignantly in her “Fierce Conversations”. When ‘The Answer’ is provided by the leader, minds in the immediate vicinity tend to close and thinking capabilities are paused. When we think a solution to a problem is found and a decision is made to run with an action plan based on that solution, we must be sure that there really are no alternatives otherwise greater solutions may be overlooked. Only thing lost by facilitating further exploration might be another 10 or 15 minutes and yet this could be the most creative quarter of an hour of an entire career. This fascinating line of enquiry is discussed by Peter Senge in the “Fifth Discipline” and it is one of the cornerstones of effective coaching.

A big decision for managers is when to mentor and when to coach; this can be a complex and subjective dilemma. Coaching sceptics will ask: if you know the answer why on earth would you not want to share it with your report? Coaches will respond: how do I know that I ‘know’ the answer? What has previously worked for me will not necessarily work for others.

Let’s run with the idea that I believe I do know the answer but choose to hold it back – at least for a while; by asking the right questions I give my report a chance to reach the answer I have and maybe produce a few more options, some of which may be even better. In pure coaching, final choice always lies with the report – even if the coach has offered a ‘suggestion’ that can sit on the table with all the other ideas. Empowerment is heightened and ownership of the process that led to the answer and hence the action plan that follows is that much greater. Players are both surprised and inspired by their own creativity. Why would a manager not want to give their report the chance to feel that good about themselves at work?

There are times when Mentoring does have a specific role to play: when speed is of the essence or in a consultancy capacity when lesser experienced staff members are honing their written skills or are involved in intricate communication strategies. Written work comes with practice and experience; important meetings can sometimes have links to other key discussions going on in the business and there may be some subtle political undertones. In these situations players would be wise to consult those who already have the t-shirt. When discussing the rationale for coaching, for me there are three broad reasons to coach: Communication; Change; Concern; and they all fall under the popular coaching umbrella of 'improving performance'. Let's look at each in turn:

a) Communication

One of the most disempowering and de-motivating experiences for team players is when they experience communication difficulties and the manager steps in to take care of it – either by assuming control or responding to the report request to do so. Unless players conquer fear, apprehension, uncertainty and a lack of focus and assertiveness in their verbal skills, they may never develop one of the most important strengths in corporate life. This is where Coaching comes in as the great confidence-builder – a natural facilitation process while players find their corporate 'voice'.

b) Change

Coaching a team player through a personal or company change initiative provides the report with a periodic soundboard and base to work from. The coach can support the report throughout the process, helping them to build an overall strategy, explore all benefits, identify possible risks, include contingency plans, gain peer support, maintain motivation and recall past successes and prime strengths at appropriate stages. This is the heart of encouraging performance.

c) Concern

The need for creativity at work is strong when there is an issue or problem to solve. It might be an inter-departmental barrier, a procedural block or something very personal like stress from a high workload. When a report comes to a manager with a concern, it's all too easy to launch into advice and direction. Coaching for clarity is a great starting point. Placing (leaving) ownership and responsibility in the hands of the report is a good antidote to 'monkey management'.

So let's assume a manager decides to coach; should they get trained to do their own coaching, hire an internal coach from across the organisation, an external coach from outside the organisation or employ a mix of all three? A risk analysis of each approach may be helpful.

RISK ANALYSIS

Manager as mentor	Manager as coach	Internal / External Coach
Disempowering for mentee	Insufficient time to coach report effectively	May take longer to understand complex departmental issues
Encourages mental laziness in the team	Lack of trust from report in opening up and addressing the tough issues	Initial cost might be greater
Options do not get fully explored	Inadequate detachment and objectivity may dilute approach	
Slower long-term development of team		

The risks of mentoring slightly outweigh the others although in terms of exploring options; coaches - or managers who employ coaching techniques - must also take care so as not to pull the blinds down too quickly when all the creative light appears to have shone through. Replacing advice with 'The Right Question' is the main tool of the Coach and if backed up with thorough and patient probing can lead to startling results.

4. Reward & Recognition

There are many different ways to reward a member of the team and many different ways to recognise their performance. I still remember a previous boss of mine from many years ago, sending my wife a bunch of flowers when I was detained very late one night - appropriate and memorable – the core elements of R'n'R.

In terms of reward, aside from a salary increase or one-off bonus there are several ways to show someone appreciation: some managers take reports out - to a restaurant, a bar, a bowling alley; some may give a theatre or cinema voucher or just say a hearty thank you. Similarly, there are different ways to recognise the value and achievements of an individual: announce their achievement at a team meeting, publish it in a bulletin, send round a team memo or establish a monthly system whereby other members of the team or organisation nominate colleagues for good performance.

Managers should take care not to embarrass anyone with a form of recognition that makes them want the ground to open up beneath them. Not sure? Ask them. Declare your desire to publicly recognise their performance and check it is something they would appreciate. Otherwise a good intention will fall flat and would be like buying a birthday gift for someone based on what you like. (Yes I've been there too).

5. Evaluation

To get a sense of where someone has been, how far they've come and where they are going, measurement is absolutely essential. Regular 1:1 sessions and structured two-way appraisals with 'smart' objectives – there's really no substitute. Keith Bishop is the product of

10 years of managerial negligence and you will not want to inherit or develop a Keith in your team under any circumstances. To avoid, give individuals attention and feedback; prevent disconnection and disengagement at all costs. Staff sleeping at work because they had a late night is one thing, but 'sleeping at work' whilst appearing to do the job is simply going through the motions, devoid of meaning and is degrading to both manager and team. Take care your office doesn't quietly become "The Office".

In terms of the 1:1 session, the term 'regular' is of course subjective - frequency needs to match the structure of the department, the experience of the team and the nature of the team's work. Once-a-year appraisals without interim catch-ups are a no-no. To fully evaluate performance and to maintain strong rapport, regular feedback from the manager is crucial and appraisal must never be a shock to the system. Reports should get used to a healthy mix of encouraging feedback and constructive criticism.

Managers would do well to avoid using the appraisal as a chance to air all their grievances over the past year. They also need to avoid using the 1:1 forum as a golden opportunity to point the finger. No report wants to hear their manager constantly criticise them as 1:1 meetings soon become something to dread and the person stops being receptive to the wishes of the manager. It is no coincidence that the word 'praise' is in the verb to 'appraise'. Achieving a healthy balance of positive and negative is important to the self-esteem of the report and the credibility of the manager. The only viable feedback from a manager is one that contains evidence, preferably written.

6. Three Sixty Degree Feedback

The evidence that a report will be most convinced by is the output of thorough research conducted across the company. 'Stop- Start-Continue' contains three simple questions that gather a broad set of feedback from a wide audience.

- What is ... doing well that he / she should continue to do?
- What is ... doing which if he / she stopped doing, would improve his / her performance?
- What is ... not doing which if he / she started doing, would really add value to the service he/she provides?

Define the audience; send out the questions in one email; collate the incoming data into one summary document; discuss with your report. Efficient and incisive.

Keys on the Table

So there you have it, the secret to effective performance management revealed – in summary:

- o locating and maximising **S**trengths;
- o defining and stating areas of **E**nforcement;
- o encouraging performance through **C**oaching;
- o establishing a **R**eward and Recognition framework;
- o ensuring that an **E**valuation and **T**hree sixty feedback mechanism is in place.

I've handed you the keys – now don't lose them.

Acknowledgments

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Addendum

What happened to Nick and the Manager? Well Nick is now happily working in a different organisation and in fact wrote to the Manager last year saying how much he had 'learned' from him in their time working together. The Manager went on to become Quality Director in a large corporate and attain two coaching diplomas.

About the author

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