



Leader as coach

Could developing your coaching skills improve your results as a leader?

By Jackie Sloane

For many people, “leading” is about being decisive and directive. But the person masterful at, say, evacuating a burning building may not be as effective leading creative problem-solvers to sustainable success over time. That often requires not always knowing the answer, learning, bringing out the best in others, being a good listener and influencing versus commanding. Depending on the complexity of your role, cultivating a coaching style could dramatically impact your results.

Steve Miller, a seasoned leader at a top communications firm, found that developing a coaching approach made him more effective in improving the results of his sales team. He was surprised at how much more engaged his people were when he had heart-to-heart conversations about what they were doing well and what wasn't working. He found he was more productive because he created an atmosphere of partnership and respect when he had to have a tough conversation. People who had been struggling turned around. They became more proactive and consistent, and their successes made them more confident. And they knew Miller would continue to challenge them, so they came to their meetings with him more prepared, and having taken the actions they agreed to take. Others noticed the energy in the office.

“I think most people want to learn and become better at what they do,” says Miller. “They need a leader to point out where they need to improve. But it's about how you position it. Now I have a process I use. I'm planning my conversations, versus just winging it, since each person is different.

“Sometimes you have to have that hard conversation, but it can be a really good thing. I was a little afraid of hurting feelings, [but] if you have the right conversation,

it won't be as hurtful. People appreciate honesty,” Miller says. “You can lay it out in a more collaborative way. I ask them to come up with strategies, versus being more authoritative, telling them what actions to take. People are empowered to make the decision to make the change themselves. Until they have taken ownership of the improvement they have to make, I don't think they will make it. There's a greater level of commitment from them to the changes they need to make. And I have much better relationships with them now.”

A coaching style can be very effective when you want to see more ownership and engagement from others in producing results. Keep the following in mind:

Focus on provoking awareness, learning and commitment versus correcting. While candor is key, criticism can be demoralizing. Sustainable changes often involve seeing things in a new way and learning. How can you connect with what matters to this person in a way that inspires a commitment to learn and take new actions?

Connect to the bigger picture. What's the end result you want to produce? If one of your people is not performing, rather than telling that person what to do, it may be time to speak to her about how her performance impacts you and the organization. You can speak matter-of-factly about what is not working, and explore what this person may need or whether the role is still a fit.

Miller's successes resulted from focusing on his own leadership development. To become a better coach, you may need to work with a coach. 

JACKIE SLOANE is an executive coach specializing in leadership communication. Her clients report greater effectiveness, visibility, influence and satisfaction through becoming more authentic and strategic in how they work with others. Have a topic you'd like to see covered in this column? Email us at editor@executivetravelmag.com.