

Expert Opinion

Effective leaders seek coaching and become coaches

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by [Virginia Bianco-Mathis](#)

Much time and money is spent on leadership development and the definition of successful leadership. With the advent of leadership coaching, another leadership approach is gaining momentum. It's called the "coaching leader."

Research and empirical evidence shows that coaching leaders -- those who embody a coaching style in how they influence others and achieve organizational goals -- are the most successful in bottom-line results.

There is a statistically significant correlation between financial performance and such coaching behaviors as self-awareness, motivation, empathy, enthusiasm, continuous learning, participation, high performance and interpersonal savvy.

Coaching provides leaders with two vehicles for growth: They can go through the process themselves to determine who they are and how they will be as leaders, and they can use the spirit of coaching as a way of being to influence their teams, organizations and communities.

Two local examples bring this concept to life: Alan Phillips, CEO of Phillips Corp., a machine-tool distribution and manufacturing firm in Columbia; and John McBeth, CEO of **Next Century**, a knowledge-based software development company in Laurel.

They take four key ingredients of a coaching relationship and apply them to an entire organization:

- Build and continuously push the vision;
- Establish dialogue as the organizational language;
- Align support structures and systems;
- Relentlessly focus behavior and results.

Push the vision

It is not enough to put a vision out there and expect it to take on a life of its own.

At Next Century, the vision and guiding principles are shared with every prospective client. "Sharing" means giving examples of how those principles have played out with past clients and will be applied toward the new client.

Every goal is tested against the vision and principles. This is seen through an example of Next Century's commitment to "helping make the world a better place." A current project applies knowledge management and technology to help personnel respond effectively to hazardous-material emergencies.

McBeth asks prospective employees, "What is your destiny?" That's a more powerful question than, "Where do you want to be in five years?"

Next Century wants employees whose life goals are aligned with those of the company.

Phillips Corp.'s vision of "being the best by any measure" is exemplified in its effort to have everyone become a "virtuoso" -- a person practicing each day to become better. All e-mail addresses end in "virtuoso.com," and every partner within the company has a personal vision statement posted on the internal intranet.

Establish dialogue

The purpose of a coaching leader's dialogue is not to convince or prove a point, but to explore the reasoning behind beliefs and assertions. In this way, employees can get beyond the barriers of normal conversation and move toward learning and support.

This is coaching at its best. Good leaders can guide superior performance just through their powerful questions:

- What is working well?
- How can we make it even better?
- What would you need to do to maximize the benefits of this system?
- What strengths do you possess that can overcome this constraint?

Such questions foster creative thinking, build trust, gain commitment and produce accountability. Phillips ends his monthly report with the reminder that "we must learn faster than the competition."

Align support structures

For dialogue and coaching to work, they must be embedded throughout the company.

At Phillips, everyone has a coach and a specific action plan. Compensation and recognition are based on progress toward audacious goals and the creative ways that obstacles are overcome.

At Next Century, financials are shared and a visioning process is part of an innovative marketing and business development approach. McBeth says the company has an infrastructure that can support from 10 to more than a thousand people. Any break in alignment means a break in performance.

This type of leadership only works for those who wish to build a successful enterprise that connects with the human spirit. If you don't wish to have this kind of company, that is fine -- just make sure you align what you say with what you do.

Don't say you want teamwork, but only reward individual behavior. Don't say you want long-term growth, then turn around and flip the company. People want integrity and honesty.

One prestigious consulting firm tells prospective employees: "You will work day and night and have no life. You will also make tons of money and can then move on to an executive position someplace else. Do you want the job?"

Employees want different things in their lives at different times. Tell the truth and let them openly dedicate themselves to your cause.

Focus behavior

Coaching leaders are positive, enthusiastic, motivational and relentless. They continually improve the level of play.

One of McBeth's mottoes is "make it necessary."

Phillips is celebrating the challenge of the present economy.

In an e-mail, he challenged his sales force to come up with creative ideas to solve a particularly difficult dilemma: "Not only will the dialogue help us solve this problem, but the partner who provides the best entry will win \$1,000,000 cash or dinner (\$55) with their significant other ... the choice being entirely up to the judge's discretion."

It is this kind of humor and support that creates zero turnover, survival through bad economies, customers who seek you out, and profits that surpass typical objectives.

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