

ITM Coaching in Interrupt-Driven Organizations

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Conversations drive innovation, change, and results. And coaching conversations, in particular, sustain the results leaders want. Mariposa Leadership, Inc. has coached individual leaders and their teams in high-tech, high-growth organizations for over 15 years. In that time, we have developed and taught ITM (In-The-Moment) Coaching™ – a practical model through which leaders help others solve problems, get “unstuck,” make decisions, and drive results. Coaching enables real change and makes results stick, even in fast-paced, interrupt-driven companies. We find that leaders feel they have little time to spend 1-1 with their team members, especially on development. ITM Coaching™ works because leaders leverage the learning opportunities that present themselves in typical day-to-day interactions. An effective leader looks for opportunities to coach “anytime, anywhere” versus being frustrated with “not having enough time to coach.”

How to Coach: Importance of the 3-Step ITM Coaching™ Model

ITM Coaching™ is a simple, yet powerful approach. The skills associated with the approach form a user-friendly acronym: RAR.

- **Rapport** - Get into behavioral rapport quickly to make a connection
- **Assess** - Understand the situation and current perspectives; set the problem
- **Re-frame** - Help solve the problem by identifying new insights or actions

As simple as these three steps may sound, usually one of the steps is left out. Here are three examples of the same scenario in which one of the crucial steps of RAR is omitted. Also included is the impact to the situation and possible remedies using RAR.

Scenario: A direct report is in a crisis situation involving a supplier and runs to his/her boss to get coached on how to solve the issue.

- *Situation omitting "Rapport": Despite the explicit contract the boss has to coach the individual on business issues, it appears that the boss is distracted because he is looking at his email.* Instead: While relationships are built over time; behavioral rapport must take place at any given moment and in every conversation. The boss needs to not only make eye contact; he needs to match the team member's body language. For example, if the team member is very distraught and pacing the room, then the leader should at least stand up and demonstrate similar intensity. This will signal that the boss is present and in synch with the direct report.
- *Situation omitting "Assess": The boss doesn't fully understand the situation or the direct report's perspective, but jumps in immediately to tell the direct report what to do and is off target on a couple of attempts.* Instead: For effective “assessment”, the boss must slow down to listen and ask relevant questions. Once the leader and the direct report are clear on the crux of the issue and the frame the direct report is coming from, new frames, ideas and perspectives can be explored.
- *Situation omitting "Re-frame": The boss asks lots of questions but doesn't close the conversation and allow the opportunity for the direct report to take a next action step. And, in the end, the conversation takes longer than necessary.* Instead: It is important to get to the “gem” that is going to help the team member re-frame the problem. A “re-frame” is a new way of thinking about an issue that leads to a new

action, behavior, or perspective. The team member must walk away with a "distinction" – something tangible that they can do differently.

With the interrupt-driven nature of organizations, we find the simplicity of the ITM Coaching™ model something that managers can easily refer to and practice. By incorporating all three steps -- RAR, rapport, assess, and re-frame -- you increase the likelihood of success and will get a good return on your time and energy.

What to Coach: A Vignette on Shifting Words, Behaviors, and Perspectives

Mary is the senior manager of a product development team at a software company. She made a lateral move into the organization only two months ago to manage a team of 25 individuals that included 20 software developers, three project managers, and two contractors. Her schedule regularly includes running weekly staff meetings and bi-weekly half hour 1-1's with her direct reports.

Mary noticed in her staff meetings that one of her project managers, Robert, had a tendency to get visibly upset. In front of the entire team, he would raise his voice at certain team members and tell them how they were not performing at the level he was expecting. Mary caught him afterwards to provide feedback. She told him how to manage the situation next time and to go back to the other person to work it out offline. Robert curbed his behavior a bit, but there wasn't much consistency over the following month. Further, Mary didn't want to just "tell" Robert what to change every time she noticed something. She wanted to "teach Robert how to fish, not just hand him the fish!" Mary was looking for more sustained change from Robert and wanted to try a more problem-solving approach -- ITM Coaching.

Mary knew she had an upcoming 1-1 with Robert she could leverage for as a coaching conversation. She would still continue to use the hallway conversations to offer up some quick feedback or to ask a quick question, but this 1-1 afforded her more than five minutes for deeper conversation.

Change Language

In the next 1-1, Robert brought up a situation with a coworker that he was unhappy about, "Mark never updates me on his project status so I don't have a clear idea of our timeline. How am I supposed to do my job?"

[**Rapport**] Mary made sure to focus on being in rapport with Robert by matching his pace, intensity and body language. She sat forward in her seat as he was, and began her coaching by inquiring about his choice of words. [**Assess**] She replied, "You sound really frustrated, and I am curious, is there really "never" been a time that Mark has updated you?" Mary noticed Robert's tendency was to use absolute terms to describe his frustrations. These words were not only inaccurate; they had a tendency to magnify the situation in the eyes of others.

Robert responded, "Well, not never."

"So he has updated you?" she asked.

"Well, yeah." he responded reluctantly.

Mary knew she started to get through to Robert and decided to dig deeper. She asked him to think about words he could use to describe his experience that were not so absolute.

At that point, Robert realized that he was making it worse for himself. He had conversations in his head and out loud that were not completely accurate. "I suppose I should really watch

myself. You're right, I'm thinking back to conversations I've had when I use those kinds of words to describe what I'm seeing around me. It is not 100% accurate, and people who don't know the situation accept it as the truth and ultimately, so do I."

[Reframe] Mary was gratified that they were getting somewhere -- Robert was reframing on his own. Mary took it one step further. "What might be a more accurate way to describe the situation?"

Mark replied thoughtfully, "A more accurate statement would be, 'There are times when Mark does not update me on his projects.'"

Change Behaviors

[Assess at a new level] "Do you have any observations about when he's not updating you?" Mary asked again. She wanted to fully understand the situation and know more about behaviors that were exhibited. This would give them something more tangible to work on.

With a reflective look on his face, Robert responded, "Well, when he is overloaded, he completely forgets to let me know. More than likely, that means his deliverable dates are slipping and he hasn't been writing code as quickly as he thought he would."

[Reframe] "So what could you do to make sure you are kept up-to-date?" Mary asked. Robert thought for a moment, "I suppose if I don't hear from him at least once a week, I could make sure I stop by his cubicle on Friday mornings to check in with him."

This was exactly what Mary wanted: To ask Robert a series of questions that would get him to think about different things he could do to make the situation better for himself. As long as he came up with the ideas, he owned them and would likely follow through. At this point, Mary could have stopped the conversation. Robert already had some new action items, but she decided to dig deeper. He had been complaining about this issue for a long time. He diminishes his own effectiveness when he gets visibly upset. The new action items will change the situation in the short run, but what about the long run? Robert was receptive to the conversation so far and seemed open to talking about it more. Mary thought he was open to examining what was underneath his actions and words.

Change Perspectives

[Assess at another level] "I've noticed that certain team members easily frustrate you. What's that about?" Mary inquired.

"Well, wouldn't you get frustrated, too? When they don't do their jobs, I can't do mine." Robert started raising his voice. "That's not fair of them to do that to me. I have responsibilities I need to deliver on! They don't care about anyone but themselves. That's how things are in this company."

[Rapport] Mary decided to respond by raising her voice slightly to stay in behavioral rapport. She initially matched his intensity to demonstrate she understood, and then slowly lowered her voice to calm him down and have him follow her lead. She continued, "What could you do instead of becoming frustrated and losing your cool? Let's admit it; you do get visibly upset in our team meetings."

"I know I can go off the handle," he interrupted. "It's just so upsetting. Do you suppose they don't respect me?" He stopped for a second and immediately came back with, "Oh, who cares anyways, I can't spend my life worrying about what others think!"

"Agreed, not a great way to 'spend your life', but going 'off the handle' does make you less effective from what I'm noticing. People tune out at that point. If I was in their shoes -- being scolded in front of my peers and new boss -- I know it would be hard for me not to tune out." Robert let out a deep sigh. "I know."

[Reframe] "Instead of getting frustrated, what can you do differently next time that happens?"

"I want to be more effective." He paused, "I guess I could remind myself that they are doing the best they can and I need to support them. That's my job. It is my job to support them even if they are overloaded," he repeated.

"Robert, yes, I think it will help prevent you from getting so frustrated." Robert smiled and looked hopeful.

Mary wanted to carry the momentum forward. "How can you make sure to put all of these great ideas into action and make them routine? And how can I help?"

Robert was engaged -- he was making notes and pulled out his phone. "I'm going to make a reminder about chatting with Mark on Fridays, if needed." He paused. "And I've written a little note here where I will see it -- it says 'people doing their best' and 'be a help, not a jerk!'" Mary and Robert laughed. "And you can help me by continuing to notice my behavior, and maybe we can check-in about how this all goes next week?"

"I'd be happy to, Robert."

Through her observations, focused questions and intent listening, Mary helped Robert come to the realization himself that he had other options for how he wanted to react and experience his situation. She didn't tell him how he should think or what he should do. She successfully enabled Robert to generate and take responsibility for new options. This is ITM Coaching™.

Conclusion and Next Steps

ITM Coaching™ works because it fits into the way work gets accomplished in organizations and it fits the way people learn and change best -- in their own way. ITM Coaching™ goes with the system instead of fighting it: It leverages the conversations that are already in place and occurring daily. It demystifies coaching and breaks it down to three steps -- Rapport, Assess, Reframe -- which leaders can remember and use as they move through their day. The next time you notice a learning opportunity, how will you turn it into a coaching moment?

For more about coaching and other valuable resources, visit www.mariposaleadership.com