

Using Your Software Coach Effectively

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Coaching is fast becoming the most effective management tool of 2000 in many business areas. With staff shortages and insufficient mentoring skills available, coaches fill a void by assisting Information Technology (IT) managers at all levels.

Recent articles in *CIO* [1] and *Fortune* [2] describe cases of coaches assisting IT clients with a variety of career concerns. A Web search on “coaching” provides hundreds of hits on articles and resources that need to be narrowed for a specific purpose. Four years ago *Fast Company* [3] magazine chronicled the success of coaches to prepare staff members to take the next step or learn how to be more successful in their present positions.

Some firms (e.g., IBM and Ernst & Young) have in-house coaches on their staffs. These companies see the value of working one-on-one with personnel to either improve performance in existing positions, prepare selected individuals for new positions, or (rarely) transform the client by reframing how they approach work—and life—situations. Other firms retain outside coaches to work with the individual to achieve the same results. Both types of coaches build trust through a confidential relationship that involves careful listening and aggressive questioning whereby the client arrives at the optimum solution that they own. Regardless of how the coaching agreement is initiated or structured, the bottom line is that all coaching is personal.

Despite the growing popularity of coaching, many IT executives are unclear how it differs from various types of human relations consulting. The objective of coaching is to leverage the individuals’ strengths to broaden their base rather than to teach them new skills or retrain them to overcome weaknesses. Coaches operate on the assumption that the clients know the solutions that will work best for them, if someone can guide them to uncover the answers. The consultant model is usually based on prepackaged solutions that worked elsewhere. These solutions are rarely long lasting because the client does not feel ownership of the solution. The consultant’s job is done when the package is delivered. Coaches are skilled at listening followed by later questioning that leads the client to uncover the best solution that is pursued with enthusiasm. Permanent change of the client is the primary gauge of a coach’s success.

The following notional examples of how to use a software coach are valid for most positions or scenarios. They are presented as typical situations found in IT and other industries.

Chief Information Officer

This position has become one of the loneliest in an organization. An effective chief information officer (CIO) must provide knowledgeable support to his or her staff as well as encouragement plus set the best example in a department that is critical to the success of the enterprise. A coach can assist the CIO in this role by guiding a clear definition of the most pressing issues and leveraging IT resources to delegate other difficulties.

Janet Trombley was a successful chief financial officer of a sizeable manufacturing firm and an experienced user of IT services. Somewhat reluctantly, she accepted senior management’s

offer to assume responsibility as CIO. She was caught in a not uncommon dilemma. Without an IT background, she found sizeable gaps above and below her. Corporate managers expected her to be able to respond to their requests for IT services as adroitly as she had their financial needs. Meanwhile, the analysts and programmers reporting to her were speaking in terms that were quite unfamiliar. This dual gap situation is the most challenging for a coach. With her coach, she prioritized the issues and approached them with confidence.

Trombley’s most pressing concern was that other executives in the firm misunderstood the nature of software and how it is produced. Her coach helped her leverage her current skills to define an approach to bridge each knowledge gap of the senior management staff. Through a consistent program of interpersonal communication, Janet was able to share her learning experience with her peers and managers to allow them to appreciate the nuances of developing and maintaining systems.

The other major problem facing all CIOs is simply too many demands and too little time to satisfy them. With her software coach as champion and guide, Trombley was able to develop and enhance her skills at prioritizing and delegating. Together they isolated those issues that only she could resolve and identified the appropriate managers to handle the others. Delegated problems were actively tracked to closure.

Development Manager

Fred Johnson had developed and installed several systems over the years. As the manager of development, he found that the old carrot-and-stick methods he was accustomed to were not working. His software coach listened carefully to his success stories and assisted him in applying the lessons learned to developing long-term skills for excellent performance.

As system development manager, Johnson had trouble keeping the teams motivated. By drilling down with aggressive questions, his coach helped him create a self-generating practice for pragmatic results. She allowed him the freedom to try out different options and weigh their merits in a confidential, supportive environment. She was careful to not pass judgment, but continually challenged him to explore alternative outcomes until he discovered a solution he knew would work for his teams. Rather than just managing for results, Johnson turned to maximizing the strengths of each employee or training them to overcome a weakness. His teams now set what were previously considered audacious goals and frequently beat them.

During this process Johnson discovered some personal habits that he learned were self-defeating. He frequently finished other people’s sentences and inserted “you know” into his speech. His coach encouraged him to listen carefully and explore different ways of interpreting his day-to-day experiences, personally and

professionally. As a result, he is much more confident and effective as a manager as well as member of his family and community.

Process Improvement Team Leader

When Susan Perkins was tapped to lead the software process improvement team for a developer in the Midwest, she was shocked. She was unsure how to proceed with the assignment much less how to obtain the results management expected. She was working with a personal coach prior to the assignment; he helped her find a coach with experience in software process improvement. Her new software coach served as a guide and mentor regardless of the model (Capability Maturity Model, International Standards Organization, or military standards) that her team needed to employ.

Perkins' major concern was that the new team was functioning at less than optimal production. With her coach, she discovered a previously unrecognized ability to foster mutual respect, trust, and freedom of expression of the process improvement team. The results in measurable output from the team were significant. Rather than pushing for action and responsibility from the team, she shifted to creating an alliance around the vision of well-defined processes.

The challenge of any process improvement team is preparing the users of the new procedures for the culture shock of a new way to develop systems. Perkins asked her software coach to assist the team with developing the skills to minimize impact of change. They learned to embrace the grieving cycle (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) and extend it to accelerate the productivity improvements of the new processes. Lewis Gray's model in *CROSSTALK* [4] was enhanced with a new sixth stage of change—ownership of the results following acceptance of the change.

Data Center/Network Manager

The other lonely IT job is the manager of a data center or large client/server network. All that George Jensen heard were problems and complaints. Little recognition was provided to the last in line of the IT process at a large government agency—leaving him feeling powerless and unmotivated.

When Jensen's manager informed him that he would be working with a coach retained by the personnel department, he was skeptical. The coach's first task was to win his trust by assuring him that *everything* transpiring between them would remain confidential. Not until his manager and personnel representative agreed to this policy, and after a few coaching sessions, did the coach earn his confidence.

Jensen knew that he had trouble expressing his thoughts and ideas, which were often quite insightful—just poorly presented. His coach provided him with alternative ways of expressing concepts and supported him with trying new language techniques. By assessing the alternatives in a non-judgmental setting, he developed latent communication skills that prepared him for the next step of his promotion plan.

For the past two years, Jensen had wanted a different job with more responsibility. While working with him on the communication skills, his coach noticed several habits Jensen did not want to deal with at first. The coach guided his client through a process of discovering how his demeanor interfered with achiev-

ing his goals. With the confidence of presenting his ideas clearly came the desire to focus on these other behavior patterns. Rather than criticize the actions of others, he learned how to ask well-focused questions that achieved the desired results without offending. Now he is on a path for a promotion in the agency.

Conclusion

Coaches develop a partnership with their clients that is based on trust and confidentiality. Although most publicized coaching examples present cases of senior executives, this new emerging management tool is effective at any level in the organization. With mentors in short supply, especially in the software industry, coaches can help managers at any level improve and grow.

Ask successful associates—you may be surprised who has a coach they are willing to refer. Finding the right person is the first step in effective use of your software coach. ♦

Look for Coaching Credentials

Coaching suffers from many of the same problems encountered with any new field of endeavor. Presently, people can declare themselves a coach with or without training. Finding the right coach involves a search to ensure the chemistry is right for the client. Coaches are trained at several reputable institutions that provide extensive and rigorous instruction programs. Whether the students have a background in psychotherapy or software engineering, they must complete the regimen offered by organizations such as:

- Coach University, 800-48COACH, www.coachu.com
- Coaches Training Institute, 800-691-6008, www.thecoaches.com

Accrediting organizations are available to assist clients with finding professional coaches. These include:

- International Coach Federation, 888-ICF-3131, www.coachfederation.com
- Professional Coaches and Mentors Association, 562-799-2421, www.pcmaonline.com

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About the Author



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