

Strategic HR Coaching: Successfully Advising Your Organization's Leaders



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February 14, 2007
By Tom Durgin
Sponsored by DBM

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

HR continues to evolve as a strategic force in top companies. As leaders are increasingly recognizing and relying on HR's knowledge and expertise in managing their employees, HR has an opportunity to solidify their strategic role.

Although being the expert with the answers can be personally gratifying, ultimately it can limit your potential. By using coaching skills to assist managers and leaders in their employee relations issues, HR professionals not only help leaders develop, they can also elevate perceptions of themselves from a trouble-shooter to a trusted advisor.

It's important to distinguish between consulting and coaching and at what points which one is appropriate. This paper will look at those distinctions, present tips to take the coaching conversation to the next level, and show how HR can increase its personal brand by adding strategic value to the company through coaching.

CONSULTANT VS. COACH

"A consultant *provides* value through specialized expertise, content, behavior modeling, skills, or other resources, to assist a client in improving the status quo." (Alan Weiss, Million Dollar Consulting) As a consultant, you are the expert – you present, sell, influence, solve problems, and strategize.

A coach *creates* value by illuminating the best in people through individualized development of the skills and qualities that support and ensure personal success and enhance the leadership skills that align to organizational goals.

As a coach, you are the entrusted partner. You ask questions, provide feedback, create a broader perspective, and listen with a third ear to the words and the meanings behind the words. A coach inspires others to be more effective as leaders and team members, builds credibility and maintains confidentiality. A coach guides clients to transformation and high performance, questions the status quo and seeks evolutionary results. In short, a coach facilitates growth and organizational development.

"Effective coaches are viewed as trusted advisors," says LaDonna Crawford, Managing Director of Executive Coaching for DBM. "They create relationships that result in outstanding outcomes for personal and organizational growth. They ask 'breakthrough questions' based on politically deft observations to help others develop their own solutions, and practice highly evolved communication skills. They educate by modeling."

Yet there is a fine line between consulting and coaching. One of the main differences between consulting and coaching is in the style of communication. A consultant tells the client the options, recommendations, pitfalls, and may propose a plan of action. There are many benefits to consulting (or telling), including:

1. It's faster – a solution can be delivered right away
2. You get to be the expert, your way is the right way, especially if it's been previously validated
3. You get what you want, which can ensure quality control
4. It's simple and results in better control
5. Everybody is (forced to be) on the same page
6. It's good for your ego and self-esteem

A coach asks questions that lead the person to the best solution. The advantages of asking over telling include:

1. Making others feel valued
2. Creating a sense of ownership, buy-in and commitment by the manager to new initiatives
3. Avoiding telling them things they already know, and enabling new and better ideas
4. Producing lasting change faster
5. Helping those coached to grow and learn, empowering them in their work, and improving relationships among employees

Intuitively we know this, but still, according to Anne Doster, Managing Director of Executive Coaching at DBM, “People come to us because we’re experts. Sometimes it’s very hard to take that hat off.” This observation is supported by the responses of a live poll conducted during an HCI webcast, in which the overwhelming majority of respondents found themselves in the “telling” role of consultant more than 25% of the time, with one-third citing “telling” in more than half of their conversations.

Not surprisingly, this affects the amount of time HR professionals can devote to strategic issues. Coaching is a faster method to induce and achieve desired lasting and exponential change, because it fosters the building of new skills and perspective, which can be utilized in future situations, as well as modeled for subordinates and colleagues.

The conversion from telling to asking can be as simple as asking open-ended questions instead of closed (yes/no) questions. Consider the difference in conversation this change can make:

Consulting / Telling	Coaching / Asking
Could you . . . ?	What could you . . . ?
Would you . . . ?	How would you . . . ?
Did you . . . ?	What might you . . . ?

This example shows how consulting keeps you in the driver’s seat, while coaching puts the onus on the other person to think through the issue and possible solutions.

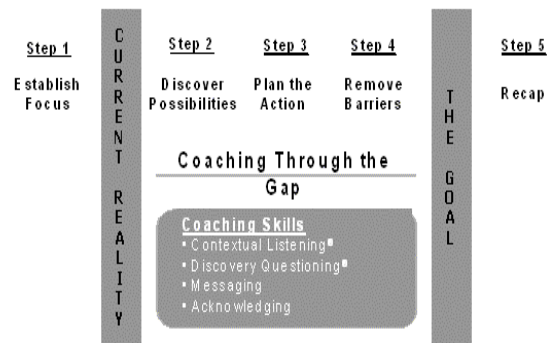
Perhaps just as important is that asking questions enables more creativity than telling, because it allows people to explore more than one solution to a challenge. It can be a collaborative exchange of ideas, information and insights. This is where the perception of expert and trouble-shooter can be transformed into trusted advisor and coach.

THE COACHING CONVERSATION MODEL®

“The coaching conversation is distinct from all other conversations,” says Jodi Jan Shafer, President and CEO of LiveGreat, Inc. “It’s very intentional and collaborative.” Utilizing the coaching conversation, you can heighten your ability to listen and frame questions to uncover, explore existing assumptions and possibly design new assumptions that support outstanding individual and organizational results. Illustrated, the model can be represented as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1

The Coaching Conversation Model®



The twin posts of “current reality” and “the goal” delineate the central part of the coaching conversation, and play an important role in beginning the conversation. The first step is to establish the focus of the conversation based on the way things are and where both parties want them to be at the end of the conversation. Step two is a process of discovery, where action options are explored and considered. Step three is the active planning process, and it accentuates one of the differences between consulting and coaching. This is where you ask, “what are *you* going to do?” instead of providing a plan.

“At step four,” says Shafer, “those engaged in the conversation may need to go back to step one. Current reality may show that some barriers to the action plan can’t be removed.” Although an important goal of strategic coaching is to question current, or default, assumptions that lead to inhibitive thinking, some barriers will remain in place. Changing the focus of the coaching conversation slightly lets participants work around those barriers. Once the goal has been reached, a recap of the steps taken to achieve it is an important part of the

conversation. It is here that the methods, ideas, and assumptions employed to accomplish the goal can be evaluated.

The three steps between reality and goal are considered “the gap.” Four major coaching skills are vital to these phases of the conversation:

1. Contextual listening (listening beyond the words expressed)
2. Discovery questioning (asking open-ended questions to elicit thoughtful answers)
3. Messaging (using your and your organization’s knowledge and experience)
4. Acknowledging (holding all parties in high esteem).

Because coaching is in large measure a questioning and listening exercise, effective coaching requires asking the right questions. Twelve questions have been found to be particularly useful when engaging in the coaching conversation:

1. What would you like to get from this meeting today?
2. What specific outcomes do you want to have at the end of our conversation?
3. What feels most important to you right now?
4. Of all the issues we discussed, which one is your top priority?
5. What is the business problem you’re trying to solve?
6. What have you tried or thought of already?
7. What really matters in this scenario?
8. What resources do you need?
9. What roadblocks do you expect or know about?
10. Who else needs to be involved?
11. Who or what is standing in your way?
12. What did you learn today?

Shafer explains how the questions are linked to the five steps in the model shown in Figure 1, with some overlap. Questions one through four help establish focus; question four is also related to questions five through seven which are part of the “discovery” phase. Questions six through eight are essential to planning what action to take. Questions nine through 11 help guide the coach and participant through Step four, removing barriers. Question 12 is crucial to recapping the experience of the Coaching Conversation Model© and solidifying ownership and personal development.

BECOMING A STRATEGIC HR COACH

As HR operations continue to move away from the predominantly transactional activities of the past towards a role as strategic drivers of their organizations, this shift must occur in all the roles they formerly performed. To assume a strategic coaching role, HR must move from assuming responsibility for managers’ “people issues” to actively listening and asking clarifying questions that allow managers to deal with issues directly. This means an end to a watchdog or gatekeeper role by encouraging and helping managers own and understand the process of talent management at their level of involvement. By providing feedback to managers about their personal style, for example, a good coach can ask the managers to reflect on how he or she handled a situation and what might be done differently in the future.

Linking HR initiatives to mission-critical goals requires excellent coaching skills. This means linking coaching to those goals by balancing organizational and leadership development needs.

Doster explains the steps to take to become a strategic HR coach in terms of *moving from* one set of practices and behaviors and *moving towards* a new set. Figure 2 illustrates the major transitions in this process.

Figure 2

Move From	Move Toward
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ You, as HR, assuming responsibility for managers’ people issues ▪ Watchdog/gatekeeper ▪ Providing feedback to managers about the impact of their personal style ▪ Linking HR initiatives to mission critical goals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Enabling managers to deal with issues directly ▪ Managers owning the process and understanding the business value ▪ Asking the manager to reflect on how he/she handled a situation and what might they do differently in future ▪ Link coaching to achieving mission critical goals

“This process empowers people,” says Mark Walztoni, Managing Director of the Center for Effective Leadership Change. “It lets managers own the process of change and understand the business value of change.” The important distinction between consulting and coaching is the increased amount of ownership the party on the receiving end has, and this ownership is what drives change.

Successfully making the transition from a consulting role to the more collaborative role of coaching is in large part a matter of attitude change, but other outside factors can affect the process. For Walztoni, it was a mix of external and internal influences:

External Factors

- Reduced staffing levels in the company requiring a narrower focus
- The outsourcing of HR operations limiting the information it has to manage
- As a result performance expectations formally changing
- Internal constituents raise their expectations of HR's role

Internal Factors

- Recognition of limited career prospects without change
- A shift in self-image from expert consultant to knowledgeable coach
- Motivation that comes from the opportunity to play a more interesting strategic role

Walztoni notes that with his own shift, and those of his team, there was a “self-reinforcing” component. “When I or a member of my team was able to solve a business problem through coaching, it reinforced our confidence in our ability and in the effectiveness of coaching.”

CONCLUSION

While the direct approach of a consultant is useful in certain situations, the collaborative approach of a coach is applicable to a wider range of business challenges. Empowering people to take ownership of a challenge and invest energy into meeting it is a win-win situation for all parties. HR, in particular, benefits from the opportunity to interact strategically rather than always play a “fix-it” role, yet at the same time remains able to use its expertise and experience.

Based on the Human Capital Institute webcast, *Strategic HR Coaching: Successfully Advising Your Organization's Leaders*, February 14, 2007

PRESENTERS

Dr. Anne Doster, Managing Director, Executive Coaching, DBM

Dr. Doster is a respected and sought-after organizational effectiveness consultant and executive coach with extensive experience in performance management and training and development. Anne has in-depth experience working in a broad range of industries including health care, finance, high technology, education and software training. Her work is extensive in organizational interventions including facilitation of change, culture shifts, and alignment of human capital with business strategy. She earned her doctorate in Adult Education with an emphasis in Training and Development at North Carolina State University and is a National Certified Counselor.

LaDonna Crawford, Managing Director, Executive Coaching, DBM

LaDonna has more than 18 years of experience in consulting, management, sales, and executive leadership positions predominantly in the human capital consulting industry. In her most recent role, she served as Managing Director of the outsourcing division of a \$2 billion staffing firm. In her current role with DBM, LaDonna is responsible for partnering with organizations to identify key business challenges and develop solutions to support senior executives in achieving superior business performance. She also manages a coaching network of professional coaches located throughout North

America. LaDonna holds a bachelor's degree in Psychology from the University of Minnesota and has advanced training in leadership development and executive coaching.

PANELISTS

Jodi Jan Shafer, President and CEO of LiveGreat, Inc.

Jodi Jan Shafer is an exceptional coach who has made a significant impact in the growth and development of the profession of coaching. She is an enthusiastic, goal-oriented entological coach with keen skills in observation, insight and discovery. Jodi has been developing success potential in individuals and groups since 1993, working with numerous individuals and organizations globally. Her consulting includes virtual distance learning design and development, Coach training, internal coaching programs and initiatives and innovative project management. In addition, she is currently involved with Seneca College Coach Training Program. Her previous corporate experience includes Curriculum and Training Director for CoachInc.com.

Mark Walztoni, Managing Director of the Center for Effective Leadership Change

The Center for Effective Leadership Change assists leaders to accelerate their effectiveness during the critical period after they accept a role within a new organization or are redeployed within their current one. Walztoni's firm assesses individual leaders, their teams, and their organizations to develop the key competencies that result in successful life-long professional transitions.

MODERATOR

Joy Kosta, Director of Talent Development and Leadership Communities at The Human Capital Institute.

Joy brings 25 years of experience in multiple facets of organizational development, human resources and business management with an emphasis in customer satisfaction, service quality, process improvement, and applying the Malcolm Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence. As founder and President of Performance Partners in Health Care, a company dedicated to building better patient experiences, she has authored several curriculums in leadership and staff development, and co-authored with Harold Bursztajn, MD Senior Clinical Faculty member, Harvard Medical School, *Building a Treatment Alliance with Patients and Families*.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This White Paper is made possible by DBM, sponsors of HCI's Talent and Career Transition Management Track.

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