

Look at Who's Coaching: A Day in the Life of a Manager

By Fiona Stott & Charles Brassard, Impact Coaching Inc.

What follows are vignettes from a typical day in your life as a manager. Did you know that you might have been a coach all these years? Did you know that you bump into opportunities to practice your coaching skills every day? Watch these movie clips and think about how this plays out in your life as a manager.

8:30 Walk about – Connecting with people

Having hung up his jacket, John starts up his computer. He chuckles to himself as he catches glimpse of the 37 new e-mail messages that arrived overnight. He's tempted to jump into the fray but decides instead to pursue his usual walk about. This morning he heads to the south west corner of his Division. He spends about 15 minutes touching base with a few of his staff, casually roaming from office to office, taking a pulse on things.

On his way back, John spots Ron who seems upset as he hangs up the phone. Having noticed Ron's mood recently, John pops his head in: "What's going on?" Ron waves him in: "I'm not getting anywhere with Sandra and the model I want to incorporate in our report. She just doesn't see it the way I do. I'm frustrated". John pulls up a chair and replies "How do you know she doesn't see it?" Ron: "Well for one thing, she says the model I've proposed doesn't address our short term needs. Plus, she's reluctant to consider other alternatives." John probes a little further. "So did she ever tell you that your model was a non starter?" John replies "No, not in so many words." John asks "Could it be that your model is actually acceptable to her over the long term?" Ron reflects on this. "You're saying don't throw the baby out with the bathwater?" "Right", says John, "So, what approach could you take?" Ron starts exploring a new possibility: "If I establish with her that my model has some merit, perhaps we can work together to address any perceived shortcomings of the model in the short term." John nodded and they continued to spend the next few minutes tossing around the types of questions Ron could ask Sandra in seeking to understand her perspective better.

Fifteen minutes later John makes it back to his own office. His email messages have compounded but he's satisfied with his gut decision to extend his walk about. He's picking up new vibes about the way his staff work together and the small amount of time invested with Ron could mean a better result in the long run.

Distinction

Managers have opportunities every day to get out of the fray of transactions and pay attention to people around them. Stopping just to say hello, smile and notice someone's feelings is part of building relationships. Conversations like the one John and Ron had, build trust and open possibilities that might not otherwise be apparent. They also build a foundation of care and support that can enable John and Ron to call on each other without ceremony when a transaction begs an immediate response.

9:45 Delegating work – Making clear requests

In sorting through his e-mail, John notices one from his boss, Emma, giving him the green light to begin the assessment of the Branch's web site. It's a multi-faceted project, involving several Divisions. Emma requests that the assessment be completed and presented to the Executive Committee in two months. John considers who might best lead this project, given the tight deadline and the hurdles involved. He invites Paul to join him in his office.

"Paul, Emma has asked us to lead the assessment to guide our web site re-design. I would like you to take this on because I think you've got both a creative and analytical mind. You've also been looking for an opportunity to interact with managers and staff from other Divisions. This assignment would require you establish a cross-divisional team of some sort and to work with them to forge a consensus around our vision for the web site. Paul acknowledges his interest and John continues. "I would like you to prepare a draft report for consideration by the Executive Committee at its April 25th meeting. It should outline the goals of the assessment, how we did it, our key conclusions and recommendations and, their implications for the various Divisions. Any questions?" "Yes" replies Paul, "you mentioned the presentation in a couple of months...what other milestones should I be aware of?" "Yes", says John, "I'd like to meet weekly for a project update and to discuss any issues you may need support on. It may also make sense to plan a dry run of the presentation with the project team before we approach the Executive Committee...maybe a couple of weeks before hand?" "That makes sense John," responds Paul who is already thinking ahead "could you ask Emma to raise this with her Executive Committee and prepare the ground for my work with each Division?" John makes a note to brief Emma and flags the commitments he and Paul have made. As Paul exits, John's next appointment walks in.

Distinction

Setting clear expectations and making clear requests is the bread and butter of every manager. In organizations, commitments break down and people get off track mainly because not enough attention is paid to requests. Requests that work are not simply left up in the air, leaving doubt as to how and when they will be met. They generate a promise of getting something specific done and clarity about the conditions underlying this promise. Delegating work is mainly about making requests. It's also an opportunity to stretch your people (i.e. support their development) while meeting the bottom line.

10:30 Listening and speaking powerfully during a meeting

John arrives just in time for the HR Committee meeting. Tom (the Chair and a peer of John) tables the strategy on university recruitment previously circulated for comments. As he's listening, John realizes that his primary concerns about the strategy never surface in Tom's presentation. He waits until Tom's had a chance to run through the entire strategy and then pipes up. "Tom, I've paid attention to your presentation and looked for how you might have incorporated the comments that I passed on to you a couple of weeks back. I still fail to see how the strategy you're proposing captures my concerns about ensuring the best possible match between graduates and jobs." "I understand your point John," says Tom, "but we had to

reconcile your comments with those from the rest of the Committee". John probes further to understand all the perspectives that emerged from the consultation and how Tom decided to incorporate them in the strategy. His assessment is that a dialogue among members could be fruitful and uncover other options.

John: "Can we take a few minutes with everyone here to explore how we could best deploy our prospective graduates?" The ensuing dialogue seems to generate ideas well beyond the scope of John's concerns, including such actions as making job openings more transparent, designing a generic interview process and, identifying mentors within the organization to ease the transition of graduates into the organization. Tom thanks everyone for the richness of their input and promises to incorporate these ideas into his strategy. The group is energized to address the other points in Tom's presentation.

Distinction

How many meetings do you attend in a day? In a week? Many managers feel trapped by meetings. They see them as a nuisance that gets in the way of the important work. What would happen if people, like John, took responsibility for the success of the meetings they participate in? Meetings could be eagerly anticipated as a space for healthy dialogue where respect for the diversity of views and opinions is valued. People would seek to understand each other without presuming ill intent. They would listen for possibilities rather than for dissonance from their own position. They would speak powerfully to advance their ideas rather than coerce people into supporting their views. How can the simplest meetings be turned into such learning experiences?

12:00 Lunch – A conversation for possibility

John grabbed his jacket and headed across the street to grab a quick lunch with Irene, a colleague from another Branch. One of his staff, Linda, was looking to broaden her experience and had been pursuing a job opening in Irene's area. Irene was interested in offering her the assignment but he and Irene had to work out the start date.

" Irene, I really can't let Linda go before June. Her main project is at the critical launch phase and finding a replacement within the April timeframe you're suggesting is next to impossible and could compromise the success of the launch." "Can the launch date be set back" asked Irene? "No, it's a firm deadline." " What percentage of her time do you forecast will need to be dedicated to the project between now and June" inquired Irene? "Initially 100%" explained John "but perhaps less by the beginning of May if I can find someone to take on the marketing component." "How about you? What could you delay or shuffle between now and April" asked John? The dialogue continued for a good 15 minutes as the two peers brainstormed about options that might help them meet their respective objectives.

"So she could wind down to 3 days a week on my project by end of April and increase the time she dedicates to your projects to 100% by June," concluded John. "That sounds workable," agreed Irene. "Why don't we both meet with her and explain what we came up with. I'll set up the meeting for next week" says Irene. "Perfect" says John and they finished off the rest of lunch, content to chat about their weekend plans.

Distinction

The prospect of losing a talented member of the team is not always rosy, especially when you've come to trust the ability and dependability of that person. Conversations like the one John and Irene had focus both on the needs and interests of the employee and the needs of the organization. Conversations for possibilities are win-win conversations. They're like a dance where both partners constantly adjust their moves to be in harmony (i.e. in the sense of "best possible outcome"). Conversations for possibilities require the ability to think outside of one's box and to let go of the tight grip we often have on "our" people, "our" mandate and "our" power.

14:00 Giving performance feedback

John is seated at the boardroom table with 10 other Branch executives listening to his staff member Eric presenting the latest developments on the project he is responsible for. It's Eric's area of expertise and John wanted to give Eric a chance to better explain the intricacies of the project and the level of support required from their departments. Eric did an excellent job until it was time for questions. Strangely, Eric became very defensive, to the point of John needing to intercede to ease tension and clarify matters.

Once the meeting ended, John invited Eric to his office to debrief the presentation. "So, how did it go for you in there?" asked John. "Well, to be perfectly honest I was getting really frustrated," says Eric. "Yeah, I noticed things weren't working out for you." Eric goes on to explain, "I know my stuff and I felt like they were trying to catch me out." John suggests: "Would you care to hear my feedback on what I observed." "Sure" says Eric.

"Here's what I saw. You fielded several questions toward the end of the presentation about the performance measures identified for the project. You didn't seem to have a response prepared and went into defense mode. As we discussed before, this is a weak spot in your presentation. Our work is not as advanced in this area as it could be." Eric looks ready to go on the offence this time but John continues. "Why do you think these performance measures are of concern to them?" Eric considers John's question and responds, "I can see that if they are going to be responsible for the implementation, it could be important to them how results will be measured." "Yeah" says John. "Think about what you could do to address their concerns and enroll them in making your recommendations stronger? Let me know eventually if you still feel they're out to get you." Eric thanks John for the feedback and promises to report his impressions of meeting Directors individually back to him.

Distinction

Observing people in action and making assessments of their performance is a key role for supervisors. For some managers, performance assessments are done as frequently and with the same enthusiasm as their tax returns. For others, giving people feedback on how they are doing, and what they need to work on to be more effective in their jobs, is an opportunity that is seized in the moment. Effective managers prepare the ground for feedback by cultivating trust and freedom of expression in their relationships. They look for openings in which to offer feedback and make it timely and specific. They receive feedback with gratitude and report what they have done about it. Feedback is one of the simplest yet powerful instruments at the manager's disposal to enhance performance and support development.

16:00 Creating a supportive environment for development

Nancy arrived with her learning plan in hand for her quarterly review with John. Even though John sees learning as an integral part of his ongoing interaction with team members, he likes the recurring aspect of learning plan updates. A year ago Nancy used the Departmental template to create a learning plan, with John's input. Her goal was to address what she perceived as gaps in her experience and skills to position herself for a middle management position in the organization. This was their chance to review where she was at and where she could focus her efforts next.

"So how was the last 3 months in terms of pursuing what you set out to do last time," asks John? Nancy, who always looked forward to these sessions, replies, "Well, that project you had me working on with the Marketing team was definitely a stretch assignment!" "How did it stretch you," continues John? "The experience of being with such a customer driven group had me consider the way I approach my work from a whole new perspective," explains Nancy. "Normally I would have focused on the product, not the end consumer. Practicing putting myself in the customers' shoes has added a valuable dimension to my other projects." "What challenges did you face in working on that project," asks John? "Well, I often felt like I was not being heard or didn't have the credibility to get my points across," reflects Nancy. "How did that come up," asks John? "Well, I guess it came down to not wanting to raise a stink, you know, challenge the prevailing view. I figured I'd stay quiet rather than upset people with my objections", explains Nancy. "Hmmm" muses John, "do you feel that the team lost out in not hearing more from you?" "That's possible", replies Nancy. "Is that something that has come up for you in other situations," offers John? "Now that I think of it, you may be right", replies Nancy. "What about looking at that area next as part of your learning plan", proposes John?

Their conversation continues to identify how Nancy might best tackle this area of development over the next few months, including through self-observation exercises and practices that will help her build her ability to be effective in conflict situations. They sign off on that and John offers his support to Nancy if and when the need arises.

Distinction

Learning plans are becoming more and more common in our organizations. The challenge for managers is to appreciate their importance in helping people to become more effective in their jobs, rather than see them as a formality to dispense with. Finding opportunities to learn in all we do is a mindset that breaks down the typical boundaries we put around learning (i.e. it must be a course led by experts outside my organization). John's skill here is in asking questions that help Nancy reflect on her experience and decide what she should focus on in terms of her development. Modeling this way of being can create a ripple effect in the organization by enhancing people's competence to learn on their own.

Reflection

You will probably recognize many other opportunities to integrate coaching into your own life as a manager. As a manager, being a coach means...

- Knowing your self enough to step out with confidence and compassion into the world;
- Using every opportunity to learn by observing yourself and others in action;
- Knowing when actions don't match intentions and being able to bring yourself and guide others back on track; and
- Knowing when to manage and when to coach and how to be effective in integrating both these roles.

Consider the following questions as you plan to deepen your awareness and understanding of coaching.

- How committed am I to learning?
- How well do I know myself and how does this inform the way I am with other people?
- What coaching skills do I need to work on to enhance my effectiveness as a manager?
- Who could support me in enhancing these skills?
- What openings do I see for coaching around me?
- What opportunity do I have to practice?