

*The Patient Experience Post*

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## Coaching for Performance Improvement: 4 key benefits of a coaching relationship

by Kristin Baird, RN, BSN, MHA

As a leader in your organization, you hold your workforce accountable for specific, measurable goals. You work on communicating those goals to your team, show them how they're being evaluated, celebrate their successes, and take the time to coach them along the way. Effectively and positively leading your team on a performance improvement journey can sometimes seem like a daunting task.

And while you're busy leading your team, communicating with them, evaluating, celebrating, and coaching them, who's doing the same for you as the leader? Have you considered how you might benefit from a coaching relationship? I used to think that coaches were only hired to assist the struggling leaders. Today, many of the country's top business leaders have engaged coaches for everything from life balance to business development and leadership development.

A coach is simply a person who supports the leader to achieve specific goals and who holds the leader accountable for achieving those goals. Coaches provide encouragement, motivation, and direction for those they are coaching.

As you progress toward your performance improvement goals, a coach can help you in critical ways. However, it's important to remember that a good coach doesn't make you into something you are not. Good coaching brings four key skills to the table to help you become more fully what you are capable of being....

### **1. Identifying and Refining Star Qualities**

Think of the biggest names in any sport: Michael Jordan, Brett Favre, Tiger Woods. Whether leading a team or excelling individually, none of these star athletes has made it to the top on their own. They all recognize the importance of their coaches in identifying their special talents and working with them to develop those talents. In the same way, a capable coach can bring an outside perspective to help you understand yourself and your special talents and potential better.

Just as an athletic coach uses a variety of different methods to develop athletes, a performance improvement coach will use a variety of tools and processes to help you discover and develop your skills. Good coaches help you learn to play to your strengths and overcome your weaknesses.

### **2. Detecting Obstacles to Success**

A key time to consider a coaching relationship is when you seem to have hit a plateau in your goals. Just as you have clear goals and performance expectations for the team you are leading, you must have clear goals and performance expectations for yourself. While some people are blessed with

the ability to look inward and objectively identify their intrinsic behaviors that create obstacles to ideal performance, most of us could benefit from some outside help in this area. A coach can help you objectively evaluate your performance and compare it against established standards and goals.

As part of overcoming these obstacles, your coach can help you discover which personal capabilities you might have been overlooking and help you consider possibilities that might have otherwise gone untapped. Coaching then helps you focus on making specific behavioral changes that will move you toward achieving your goals.

### **3. Maintaining Accountability**

One of the greatest benefits of a coaching relationship is that you will have an objective third party holding you accountable for your personal goals. After helping you identify your specific strengths and areas for development, your coach will help you set specific goals and identify the significant milestones to reach those goals. Throughout your coaching relationship, your coach will work with you to measure your progress and ensure that your performance improvement is sustained.

Your relationship with your coach will sometimes be challenging, as one of the coach's goals is to break through whatever resistance you put up, either consciously or unconsciously, to improve your performance. Remember that, while it might seem that your coach is being a stickler sometimes, it's his job to help you think through important issues in new ways. Your coach will guide you to understand how your behaviors affect progress toward your goals and make sure you continue that progress, even in the face of your own resistance.

### **4. Structuring and Supporting Success**

One of the most important aspects of coaching is defining what you want to achieve. I like to spend time with each of my coaching clients on defining their vision. While it may sound easy, many of us have never really articulated how we define a high-performing team. Once we have crystallized the vision, I can help them structure their path to success.

Do you retain information better when you read it, hear it, or have hands-on experience with it? An effective coach will listen to you and structure your coaching relationship to connect with your individual learning style. Your coach should support you as your progress toward your specific goals and also celebrate with you as you reach milestones. You will feel a sense of energy and motivation from your coach. At the same time, your coach will continue to evaluate your progress plan and help you tweak the structure as the two of you discover the most meaningful process for you.

### **Selecting Your Coach**

Have you noticed that most of a coach's "job description" involves words such as *helping*, *assisting*, and *guiding*? These are the most important characteristics of an effective coach. An effective coach doesn't do your planning for you; she guides you in developing your own plan. An effective coach doesn't tell you what your strengths and weaknesses are; she assists you

in drawing these characteristics out of yourself and supports you as you enhance them.

Because a coaching relationship requires whole-hearted commitment from both parties, it is important that you choose your coach carefully. An effective coach possesses a skill set that differs from strict management or training. Since the coach's job is to help you think through important issues and challenge and support you on your performance improvement journey, there are some basic criteria to consider when selecting a coach.

Does your coach have the wisdom you require? Is this person insightful? Does the coach have relevant personal experiences and a clear idea of how those experiences could serve as inspiring to you?

Do you feel a sense of rapport with your potential coach? Because coaching can be a deeply personal relationship, you must feel respect and trust with your coach if you are to gain the most benefit. If you and your coach are a good fit, you will feel comfortable when that person asks you to wrestle with tough questions about yourself, plays "devil's advocate," or encourages you to stretch beyond your comfort zone.

Coaching is effective for leaders at all levels who want to achieve optimal performance. Regardless of your title or position, coaching gives that little extra encouragement leaders sometimes lack as they pour their energies into guiding their employees' journeys. Once you've determined that, you will benefit from a coaching relationship and have found a coach with whom you feel comfortable, and your journey toward performance improvement will be immeasurably enhanced.

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*Nurse, author, and consultant Kristin Baird, "Healthcare's Customer Service Guru," is the author of *Raising the Bar on Service Excellence: The Health Care Leader's Guide to Putting Passion into Practice* (Golden Lamp Press, 2008), *Reclaiming the Passion: Stories that Celebrate the Essence of Nursing* (Golden Lamp Press, 2004), and *Customer Service In Healthcare: A Grassroots Approach to Creating a Culture of Service Excellence* (Jossey Bass, 2000).*