

How to Coach Employees Who Don't Want to Be Coached

Maria Cosgrove - 7.02.2019

Coaching is about facilitating positive change. But what can you do as a leader when your organization pushes coaching as a performance intervention on an individual who does not want to change?

There are numerous ways in which your employee's resistance to coaching can be demonstrated. He or she may continuously reschedule the meetings in a passive attempt to avoid it or simply decline an offer to be coached in a direct way.

The temptation is to turn a blind eye, especially if it concerns more experienced employees who you trust will do a good enough job. However, in doing so, managers and leaders ignore the opportunity to help their employee to develop and achieve a greater satisfaction from work and life. So what can you do when your employee is resistant to accepting your help?

Here are some practical steps you can take to overcome that challenge.

1. Understand the reasons behind their resistance

Instead of forcing coaching on your employees, make a conscious effort to see the situation from their perspective. Schedule a face-to-face meeting to talk to them about their concerns. Allow yourself to be genuinely interested in hearing their story. Put yourself in their shoes as you try to understand what is it that leads them to cancelling your meetings or what really is behind their hesitation to accepting your help. Showing your employee that you are actively seeking to

understand their reasons can be enough to bring them closer to the idea of being coached.

2. Trust, safety, transparency

Establishing and operating in the environment of trust, safety and transparency is a crucial aspect of coaching. Because of the nature of coaching, a coachee by exploring their thoughts and feelings in front of their manager can feel vulnerable, which is not a comfortable place to be. Luckily, there are a few things you can do to build a positive and trusting relationship with an employee who you're trying to coach:

- share your own experience of being coached;
- highlight that everything that is said during your sessions is confidential and won't be repeated to anyone else in the organisation;
- actively listen to your employee, avoid interrupting, paraphrase back to them and mirror their style;
- ask for permission to share your observations and while expressing your thoughts focus on actions or behaviours rather than on a person.

3. Bigger picture

Often, resistance to coaching is related to the lack of knowledge and the fear of failure that can be associated with that. To settle this fear, give your employees a reminder of what they're working toward, what the company's mission and values are. Make sure they understand how this impacts their own goals and objectives and how they can contribute to the final outcome. Highlight the importance of bridging the knowledge gaps that is just as important for their own development as it is for the company's growth.

While coaching employees who tend to resist the process, use these goals and objectives as an anchor. Referring back to their goals and objectives will release the pressure and discomfort of feeling exposed and vulnerable and let the employee to focus on something tangible and measurable.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of coaching depends on a positive relationship with your employees and as such, it can take time and work. However, if someone is

resistant to being coached, pressurising him or her into it may damage your relationship. If the employee continues to resist your help despite all your efforts, simply put the coaching on pause. If the issue you're trying to resolve is serious, consider bringing in an external consultant or someone from your HR team to help.

When to Coach and When Not To

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By AMA Staff

Coaching is just one tool that a manager must use to be successful. Used in the right situation at the right time, coaching can make the life of a manager immensely easier. Conversely, a manager will end up extremely frustrated if they try to coach employees who need something else from their manager, whose situations do not call for coaching, or who flat out don't want to be coached. Learning how to recognize when and when not to coach is just as important as learning how to coach.

Coaching is a dialogue that leads to Awareness and Action. When an employee has the skills and ability to complete the task at hand, but for some reason is struggling with the confidence, focus, motivation, drive, or bandwidth to be at their best, coaching can help. Employees typically struggle because one of three things is in their way:

1. **Skills and Abilities**—They currently lack the skill or ability to complete the task at hand; this relates to Aptitude.
2. **Themselves**—They currently lack the motivation, focus, chutzpah, confidence, or commitment to complete the task at hand; this relates to Attitude
3. **Outside Factors**—They currently are being affected by things that are largely outside their control, such as not having the Available Resources, changing market conditions, ineffective vendors and partners (internal and external), or poor relationships with various stakeholders and colleagues.

If an employee needs to develop specific skills and abilities, coaching is not the answer. You don't teach someone how to create a budget for the first time by asking him curious questions in an unattached manner! You teach someone a new skill by giving him the proper instructions for that particular task. If you tried to coach him, you would end up driving yourself crazy and your employee out the door. To that end, when

determining whether coaching is the right tool to use in a certain situation, first ask yourself this question:

- **Is this about Aptitude? Is there a lack of skills or ability getting in the way of the employee's success?**

If the answer is "yes," then your answer to whether or not this is a coaching situation is "no."

If, in fact, the answer to the first question is "no" or "not really," next ask yourself:

- **Is this about Attitude—his confidence, commitment, enthusiasm, focus, chutzpah, frustration?**

If the answer is "yes," then you have a situation that is primed for coaching. You will want to create a dialogue that helps the employee become aware of what they are doing and then help them develop an alternative action that will lead to better results—in short, coach them.

If the answer to the second question is "no," then most likely the answer to the next, and final, question is "yes."

- **Is this is about an outside factor getting in the way of success (i.e., lack of Available Resources, changing market conditions, poor relations with another stakeholder(s), or lack of direction or support from me)?**

If the answer to this question is "no," you need to reevaluate the answers to all three questions because, chances are, you've missed something along the way. If the answer is "yes," you have two more questions to ask yourself:

- **Does the employee have the skills and abilities to effectively deal with the outside factors in order to be successful?**
- **Does the employee have difficulty dealing effectively with the outside factors despite having the skills?**

The answers to these questions will lead you down the same path as before. If the employee needs skills, teach him, but be sure to do it while utilizing coaching skills such as concern and listening. If he needs help with his attitude, coach him, but be prepared to offer suggestions and teaching tips along the way—dealing with outside factors can be tricky and there may be some skills you can teach as you go.

The two case studies that follow offer good examples of how to handle situations that need a teaching conversation vs. situations that need a coaching conversation.

TO COACH OR NOT TO COACH—CASE STUDIES

CASE #1: LAURA AS PROJECT LEAD

The Scene

Technically speaking, Laura is one of the best people on your team. She is highly competent at what she does and is one of the most motivated and focused people you have ever worked with. Laura has been a key player on numerous project teams, and on many you have regarded her as your “number two.” She knows what it takes to complete the types of projects you do, is respected by her peers, and always has great ideas and approaches that help your projects surpass their goals.

As a result of Laura’s success, about a month ago, you decided to make her team-lead for the next project. You informed her of your decision and told her that although you would be a member of the team, she would be leading it—the goal being that after this project you would start to pull yourself completely out of the process. You then met with her about a week later to go over the project plan that she had created. You let her know that her approach was excellent, and you have no doubt that she was on her way to overseeing a successful project.

During the first two team meetings, a problem has arisen—the meetings are dreadful and, for the most part, a waste of time. There is no agenda (written or otherwise) and in addition to starting late, Laura has not been clear about what it is that she hopes to accomplish during the time that

she has the team together, so people leave the meeting unclear of their next steps or responsibilities. Laura is apparently unphased by any of this and is following her project plan “to a T.” You know you need to have a conversation with Laura about the meetings, and you are just beginning to think about how to proceed.

The Questions

1. *Is this a situation that calls for coaching?*
2. *How would you structure the conversation?*

The Response

1. *Is this a situation that calls for coaching?*

The first question to ask oneself is: Is this about Aptitude, Attitude, or Available Resources?

In this case, the question is about Laura’s Aptitude in planning and running a meeting. Laura has the project management skills, but has no experience in conducting an effective meeting. This is not a situation for coaching, but rather for teaching. Laura needs to be taught some basic techniques for leading a meeting, and then perhaps help in implementing those techniques.

2. *How would you structure the conversation?*

- A. Tell Laura you want to check in on how the project is going.
- B. Ask her how she thinks everything is progressing.
- C. If she brings up the topic of her dreadful meetings, ask her if you can give her some feedback and go to E.
- D. If she doesn’t bring up the topic of meetings, reassure her that you think her technique and plan are solid and then ask her if you can give her some feedback.
- E. Tell her your intent is to see her succeed and a way to do that is for her to make the most of the time she has the team together for meetings.
- F. Teach her about setting meeting objectives, outlining agendas, and assigning tasks with deadlines to people at the meeting.
- G. Ask her if she has any additional thoughts about how she might make

the most of her meetings.

H. Assure her of your confidence in her as a team lead and in the project.

CASE #2: COLE AS CROSS-FUNCTIONING TEAM LEADER

The Scene

Cole is one of your star employees. He's risen quickly and has become a strong player within his own small team. He is ambitious, assertive, and can think outside of the box. He knows what it takes to lead a successful project team, and has done so many times. He is respected by his peers, as well as others in the company who want to duplicate his systems. His work is even beginning to gain the attention of the senior management team.

As a result of Cole's success and your desire to help him grow and develop, you assigned him to a new type of project: Leading a cross-functional project team, of which some members are more senior. You told Cole the good news. Surprisingly, he wasn't as excited as you had expected. However, he said that he'd gladly take on the new challenge and wouldn't fail. He requested that you meet with him later in the week to go over his project plan—a request that you found a bit odd, given his large amount of experience. As usual, the plan was well thought out; you let him know that he was on his way to leading another successful company project. You also let him know that you'd be attending the first few meetings as his support, but would eventually turn it completely over to him.

The first two meetings went well. Cole presented a clear agenda, defined roles succinctly, and ensured that everyone knew the objective and expectations of the project. However, at the third meeting, you noticed that when challenged, Cole deferred to the senior members of the team, instead of stepping up or taking charge of the situation. Then during the last meeting, a team member senior to Cole asked him to clarify one of his decisions. "Why did you decide X instead of going with Y?" To your surprise, Cole began to back-pedal on his decision (which you thought was a sound one) and ended by saying, "You know, it's fine if we go with Y."

Cole left the meeting a little shaken, and you left baffled about what had happened and why Cole wasn't stepping up to the plate like you thought he would.

You know you need to have a conversation with Cole about the project in general, and the last meeting in particular, and you are just beginning to think about how to proceed.

The Questions

1. *Is this a situation that calls for coaching?*
2. *How would you structure the conversation?*

The Response

1. *Is this a situation that calls for coaching?*

The first question to ask oneself is: Is this about Aptitude, Attitude, or Available Resources?

This situation is about Cole's Attitude toward successfully running a new project and leading senior members on the team. Cole has the project-management skills (Aptitude), but is lacking confidence (Attitude) when interacting with, or being questioned by, senior members of the project. This is a coaching situation because it is about Attitude. Cole is holding back and needs to be coached on his confidence level when interacting with senior members on the team.

2. *How would you structure the conversation?*

- A. Tell Cole you want to check in on how the project is going.
- B. Ask him how he thinks everything is progressing.
- C. If he brings up the topic of the senior members of the team, start coaching him on this topic.
- D. If he doesn't bring up the topic of working with senior members of the team, reassure him that you think his skills and planning to date are very good and then ask him if you can give him some feedback and possibly do some coaching with him.
- E. Tell him your intent is to see him succeed and a way to do that is to provide the leadership, of which you know he is capable, to every member

of the team—even those people more senior to him.

F. Start coaching him on this topic.

G. Assure him of your confidence in him as a team lead and in the project.

5 Ways To Better Coach Employees: It's About Them, Not You

by LISA MCKALE

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"C'MON, COACH, SEND ME IN! I CAN DO IT."

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"I feel like I'm not getting through to them."

"Don't they hear what I'm saying?"

"They just don't listen to me!"

Any time we try to teach and **can't get employees to catch on**, it's frustrating.

We pride ourselves on being good [coaches](#). So, when we can't seem to get employees on the same page, it saps even the most patient manager.

But before pinning the blame on the employee, consider that **the problem could be coming from you**.

A crucial part of coaching is to play to the person's strengths.

It's useless to coach a 350-pound lineman to be a fleet-footed wide receiver. It helps to think of your employees the same way.

"Coach employees to their strongest abilities and the lessons will pay off," [says David Lee](#), founder of HumanNature@work.

And **keep yourself out of it**.

Coaching isn't the time to wax poetic about how you started at the bottom and hit heights no one expected. How well YOU do the job has little to do with how your employee can or will perform.

Here are **5 guides to hone your skills**, so your coaching invests in employees performing their best and continuing to improve.

1) Let the Employee Define the Problem

Avoid asking your employee a question then immediately launching into an explanation or list of problems.

This inhibits the **most critical part of a teaching moment**: We don't let the employee give a full answer.

For example, you see an employee struggle with a task and ask, *"Is there something about the process you don't understand?"*

But rather than wait until the employee answers, you keep going: *"Because it is a little tricky if you don't do it very often, and it has to be done in a very a specific way – here let me show you."*

Leave it at one question, then **let the employee tell you what's wrong**.

This not only makes coaching more interactive, it also spares the person from having to listen to an explanation they don't need.

Plus, offering your own fix [doesn't teach the employee anything](#), other than you know what you're doing and they don't.

2) Be Careful About How You Point Out Errors

Never assume the employee *knows* he or she is [doing something wrong](#). It could be something the employee doesn't realize or isn't aware of.

So, avoid interrupting the employee while he's in the process of doing something wrong **unless it's an absolute emergency**. This could come across as though you're spying, and it's demeaning.

For example: *"Um, OK that's wrong. You're not supposed to start cataloging stat sheets before they get final review."*

If it is something that can be easily fixed, bring it to the employee's attention as soon as possible – but **resist pouncing on the mistake** out of the blue.

Otherwise, the employee might wonder, “Does she peer over my shoulder looking for me to make a mistake all the time?!”

3) Come Up for Air

If you're explaining something – especially if you feel yourself running-on – stop and ask, “Do you have any comments or questions?” or something similar.

Don't just talk at your employee.

Trying to drill **too much information at once can overwhelm them**, which is counterproductive. Even a small pause helps keep the person from becoming confused or disinterested – or both.

4) Use Teaching Stories – But Make Them Brief

Teaching stories can help an employee comprehend something, **but not if they go on for 30 minutes**.

Stick to short examples limited to a few minutes. Make sure your anecdote relates directly to what you're trying to teach the employee.

Try to intersperse teaching examples with questions, such as, “Can you relate to that?”, or “Have you had that kind of an experience?”

This helps the other person stay engaged, and it **helps them connect the dots** between your story and their situation.

5) Don't Wallow in Your Own Brilliance

As with keeping teaching stories brief, **also remember to keep them relevant.**

Before diving into a coaching story, be clear about why you're doing it.

Ask yourself, "Am I telling this for MY sake or for theirs?"

Good managers do tell stories from their own past in an attempt to relate to employees on their level. It's effective if you're using a past example of a time *you* slipped up to get your employee to understand what not to do.

Saying "*I did ___ and realized it was the wrong move because ___*" provides the employee with a real-life illustration of what he or she should do (or avoid doing).

But too many managers get caught up in the moment, **relaying information that's irrelevant** to the employee or the task at hand.

Stick to lessons that truly **help the employee master a new task** rather than tangents that waste their time.

Focusing solely on their improvement rather than your own ego makes you a better coach – and brings employees along better, as well.

Managing an Employee with a Bad Attitude? Just Focus on What This Person Does.

An employee who complains is tolerable if you set guidelines for what is acceptable behavior.

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Opinions expressed by *Entrepreneur* contributors are their own.

I teach leadership programs all over the country, and one of the most significant questions I get from leaders and managers in my programs is how to deal with an employee's bad attitude. I sympathize with them. Having a person with a bad attitude on the team is terrible for morale, bad for customer service, reduces productivity and slows down performance on the team.

If you are in a leadership role, here's the deal. There is a big mistake being made because when it comes to coaching for performance -- mark this down, and burn this into your leadership brain -- you can't coach attitude. Yes, you read that right. You can't coach attitude.

Related: [How to Improve Your Attitude in a Matter of Minutes](#)

Why?

Here's a few reasons.

- Attitude is too vague, and most people don't know what it means. How do we define "positive attitude?" Everyone's definition can be different.
- Barring a personality transplant, most people will not change their attitude because they don't want to change.
- Attitude can't be measured so how do I know when someone gets better?
- Most people with a bad attitudes think their attitude is just fine and wonder what all the fuss is about anyway.

But if that is the problem, how do you as a leader solve it?

The answer is not to coach attitude at all, but to coach actual behavior. Why behavior? Keep in mind that all behavior by a team member can be measured, observed and tangible. Let's say, for example, you have an employee, we'll call him Jimbo, who is rude to his fellow teammates. On the surface, it sounds like an attitude problem but what it is, in this case, is a behavioral issue.

Related: [To Be an Effective Leader, Sometimes You Need to Give Yourself a Time Out](#)

If Jimbo is in a meeting and rolls his eyes and mumbles when someone else is speaking, that is observable inappropriate behavior. When Jimbo habitually shows up 20 minutes late for a team meeting that is measurable inappropriate behavior. And when Jimbo sends out an email that is laced with profanity to fellow team members that is tangible inappropriate behavior.

We need to define standards of behavior. It is just simply defining, in writing, what is and what is not appropriate behavior. I strongly recommend you pull a cross-functional team of employees -- not management -- together and ask them to develop behavioral standards. This approach gets more buy-in and ownership because they wrote it.

World-class organizations like Disney, Ritz Carlson, Zappos, The Navy Seals and Marriot all have very clear behavioral standards.

Organizations must have standards for behavior with:

- Customers
- Coworkers
- Management
- Vendors
- Suppliers
- The community

The standards apply to all interactions in person, in writing and on all technology. All standards need to be observable, tangible or measurable.

[Related: 6 Actions Even the Least Confrontational Managers Must Take to Hold Employees Accountable](#)

Once we have the behavioral standards in writing, we can then:

- Train everyone in the new standards
- Explain how they were developed
- Explain why they are in place
- Talk about world class organizations who have them
- Explain how it will help the organization
- Tell people what is expected of them with the standards
- Tell them the rewards of meeting or exceeding the standards
- Tell them the consequences if they don't meet the standards

Now let's get back to Jimbo. Once we have the behavioral standard in place, we can hold him accountable. If he steps out of line, we can show him in the standards, explain why the behavior was not appropriate, and start holding him accountable to them.

What is interesting when you starting getting people to change behavior and hold them accountable, their behavior often changes, but guess what else? It amazingly improves their attitude.

