

The Kind of Homework That Helps Coaching Stick

Managers can have a powerful, positive impact on their employees' performance, engagement and development through coaching. When skillfully done, it can help employees clarify meaningful goals and make progress toward achieving them. But, many managers make the mistake of stopping the coaching process at the end of each conversation. You're likely to get better results if you end each session with something for your employee to take away and work on independently — homework.

Coaching homework might come in the form of an inquiry to ponder, an assignment to complete, or an experiment to try. Occasionally, you might also agree on homework for yourself, such as introducing your employee to someone from whom they can learn, or seeking authorization for training expenditures.

In order to give your employees meaningful homework, lay the groundwork by stepping out of the directing role and into a listening and learning role. By asking open-ended questions, listening actively, and engaging respectfully with your employees, you build the trust and rapport that is the lifeblood of effective coaching. As you gain greater insight into your employee's thinking, motivations and interests, you'll be better able to challenge and support him or her with homework that stimulates learning and development.

Coaching homework should help an employee make progress towards achieving a goal that he or she cares about. Sometimes the coach may suggest a homework assignment; other times the coachee may propose one. Either way, devising appropriate homework involves talking with the employee about what sorts of behaviors and experiences are likely to facilitate goal achievement, as well as what metrics can be used to measure progress toward that goal. These activities and metrics help build structure, accountability, and results into the process.

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Coaching
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Homework varies according to the type of coaching you're doing. For example, performance coaching homework often focuses on practicing a skill (such as facilitating team meetings or presenting) or devising and implementing a solution to a performance challenge (such as asking for help as soon as problems arise or delegating work effectively). A professional I'll call Anne was frustrated by her inability to speak up and command attention in meetings. Although knowledgeable, analytical and highly insightful, she struggled to be heard in a firm where the culture was described as a "free-for-all" that favored informal and often aggressive communication. Her performance reviews suffered, causing her even greater anxiety. To progress, Anne needed tasks and tools that would enable her to overcome her anxiety and learn to communicate more powerfully.

We devised a series of assignments and experiments that appealed to her research background, mentally shifting her view of herself from a helpless person in jeopardy to a social scientist analyzing the firm's communication patterns. She mapped and notated the flow of communication during meetings to examine what types of messages had most impact, who had greatest influence, and what the most influential communicators did. She experimented with a variety of communication behaviors, such as raising a hand and continuing to speak when interrupted and avoiding the use of qualifying phrases like "I could be wrong, but." She recorded the results, and reported them during our coaching conversations. These assignments helped her to identify and practice a set of communication strategies — challenging others, using humor, and making concise, persuasive summaries of her main points. Once she became comfortable with these strategies, she deployed them to excellent effect, increasing her performance and influence in the firm as well as her own self-confidence.

When you're coaching an employee in order to support career development, you'll want to identify activities that help make progress toward a specific career goal. It might entail gathering information, forging a new relationship, taking on a new project, trading responsibilities with another employee, or planning workflow to accommodate training time. Identifying meaningful homework for career development starts with asking questions about the employee's developmental goals, such as:

- What would you like to learn during the next quarter?
- What projects would you most like to work on? How would working on them serve your goals?
- What roles in the organization would you like to learn more about?
- In what ways do you think you could add greater value to the organization?
- Improvement in what skill would have the greatest impact on your career development?

George had been managing a family-owned agricultural products company for 12 years when I met him in an executive program. His small team of account managers was stable and performed well, but he was aware of a growing sense of stagnation among them, and was also eager to find ways to harness each manager's strengths and interests in order to reinvigorate them and the firm. Through a series of coaching conversations beginning in the late spring, he began laying the groundwork for each account manager to have a month of focused developmental time during the firm's seasonal downtime in the late autumn and early winter. Each member of the team was responsible for devising a project-based learning activity that would serve his or her own developmental goals while also contributing to the success of the firm. These employee-initiated action-learning projects ended up bringing about an impressive modernization of the firm's talent management processes (specifically, the institutionalization of formalized learning and development programs), an increased sense of team cohesion and innovative capacity, and improvements in each participant's performance as a manager.

Regardless of what form it takes, effective coaching homework is always employee-centered. Under no circumstances should the homework ever be busywork that creates low-value tasks for the employee. When coaching, managers must avoid the insidious tendency to assign something that's not valuable just for the sake of having assigned something, or to assign homework that serves the manager's needs more than the employee's.

Any developmental experience can be made more valuable by taking the time to reflect on it. Regardless of what activities you ask your employees to complete in between coaching conversations, having them record and share what they did, any challenges they experienced, what the results were, and what they learned from the experience is a best practice. In addition to boosting your employee's learning, it will also help you to develop as a coach.

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~ Monique Valcour, MARCH 03, 2015