



Igniting minds for harnessing potential –

How to be an effective coach and harness the potential of your people?

By Prasenjit Bhattacharya

“One of the early successes I recall, in facilitating a workshop on total quality management, involved a colleague of mine. This was the first time I was the lead facilitator for such a workshop. My colleague helped me with the logistics, and in the evening, we had long chats on how the workshop went. He asked me questions which helped me reflect on the day’s learning and strategize for the next day. At the end of three days I got a rousing ovation from participants. What the participants did not realize was that my colleague who played only a marginal role in the workshop was actually my boss! He was introduced as a senior consultant and his job was to coach me during the course of the workshop. What I did not inform the participants was that my boss was considered an expert on total quality management.”

This experience illustrates the role of the coach. One often does not realize the extent of his contribution. Most of us know Sachin Tendulkar. Many do not know Ramakant Achrekar, his coach.

What is the difference between a boss and a coach? An obvious one is that a boss gives solutions while a coach asks questions that force one to think for oneself. The boss creates dependency whereas the coach makes one progressively independent.

Underlying the actions of the boss is often the following unstated assumptions about the “boss-subordinate” relationship:

- **Relationship of thinker and doer:** where the boss does the thinking and the employee carries out instructions.
- **Relationship of doctor and patient:** where the boss acts as a physician to motivate employees by understanding their inner blocks and helping them deal with their resistance.
- **Relationship of boss and subordinate:** similar to thinker and doer except, the boss is a professional and uses management by objectives (set by the boss) and the subordinate is left to sink or swim once objectives are set.

Implicit in these relationships is the belief that

- There is managerial elite
- Employee need to be controlled/directed/counseled and motivated.
- Onus is on the employee to change his behaviour rather than manager changing his assumptions.

I sometimes show a video recording of a performance review discussion between a manager and his team member doing a performance review. In this video the boss sets the goals, gives grudging acknowledgements for targets achieved (saying “You have achieved the target in some areas. The boss gives suggestions on what needs to be done differently. He inquires about the well being of the team member’s family, and assures the team member of all budgetary support if he achieves his targets. He ends by saying, “This year you must achieve all your goals for me. I will take care of your future.”

What is interesting to me is not the video, but the reaction to the video from different people. Younger people, particularly in newer industries like BPO, find more areas for improvements in the boss’s style ranging from his paternalistic attitude to his inability to involve the team member in joint goal setting. In groups, where the average experience is above 15 years, especially in older organizations, most people find more positives including comments like “supportive boss” and “cares for his team member.”

I believe our interpretations are colored by our beliefs. Traditionally, our society has been a patriarchal society. Many senior managers today have grown up imbibing the assumptions of patriarchy. Peter Block in his book *The Empowered Manager* lists the following assumptions in a patriarchal society:

- Submission to authority
- Denial of self expression
- Sacrifice in the present for unnamed future towards
- Belief that the above are just

The above assumptions were true not only in a joint family in a patriarchal society, but also in many organizations in the past. Older managers who have grown up with the above assumptions interpret the video recording more positively, than younger employees who do not necessarily subscribe to these assumptions. I believe these assumptions are at the root of why well-meaning managers are often disappointed by the reactions of the younger employees they are trying to coach. While they see themselves as coaches, their team members see them as bosses.

John Whitmore, the best selling author of *Coaching for Performance* defines coaching as “unlocking a person’s potential to maximize their own performance. It is helping them to learn rather than teaching them.”

Going by the above definition, good coaches are rare. Most of us have experience of working under a boss who is a good teacher, even a mentor, rarely an effective coach. While a mentor can share her knowledge with us, a coach can often make magic by triggering the hidden potential within us. Whereas the suggestions given by their knowledge and experience, the questions that a coach asks forces us to cut through superficialities, examine issues like personal meaning in life, and come up with alternatives which are often better than what the coach himself could have thought of. That is why coaching can often have a transformational effect as opposed to incremental improvements through other means.

So what are those skills required to be an effective coach? Fundamentally, it is all about building trust and converting potential into performance.

Building trust

By far the most important prerequisite to successful coaching is the ability to build trust. Trust is in focus in recent times with a number of books and articles on the subject. Stephen M R Covey, in his book, 'The Speed of Trust' forcefully argues the business case for building trust giving examples of how trust increases speed and brings down costs. He quotes a Watson & Wyatt study that shows that return to shareholders in high trust organizations are three times more than organization with low trust. Customers trust companies whose employees trust their leaders. Yet, when it comes to building trust, a global study quoted in Harvard Business Review (Decision to Trust – Robert F Hurley, September 2006) reported that up to 50% managers do not trust their leaders.

How is trust built in relationships?

There are some personal attributes that helps in building trust, for example, integrity, fairness, and competence of the manager. And of course, there is no substitute for genuine caring.

Integrity is the degree to which action matches words and how honest and ethical the manager is. A friend of mine was narrating a recent incident of meeting a CEO of a well-known company who is known to travel economy class. In fact, the 'single status' policy in his Organization means that all executives travels by same class. On seeing him in business class my friend was tempted to ask if the policy has changed. "No replied the CEO, but I have. At my age I want to travel more comfortably when I travel long distance." However, he was very particular in making sure that the difference in fare was paid by him and not by the company. Integrity is seen when people who can get away by making an exception for themselves decide not to.

Applying the same set of standards to themselves as it is for others is perceived as **fairness**. People are willing to trust managers who are not known for their tact, provided they are perceived to be fair. Johnson & Johnson or a Fedex makes it to Great Employers list in different geographies because their employees know their managers to be fair. Indeed, fairness is a cornerstone of their corporate culture. While individual managers may still indulge in favoritism there are strong appeal processes even for decisions taken by very senior managers. A coaching culture is easier to establish in organizations which are marked by high degree of equity and impartiality, and correspondingly lower politics and favoritism.

A coach also establishes her credentials by displaying **personal competence**. Competence in the job is understandable. After all, one is unlikely to go to a Doctor just because he is fair and has high integrity. However, many over-emphasize the role of competence in the job as a pre requisite in coaching. Functional knowledge and skills may help in making one a good teacher, not necessarily a good coach. A well-known

story in coaching circles is how when a tennis camp in a hill resort ran short of coaches, they enlisted two skiing instructors as “tennis coaches” as an experiment. At the end of the coaching camp the coaches who got the most positive feedback from the players were the skiing instructors! Apparently, while the tennis coaches were forcing the “right techniques” on the players, the skiing coaches, not being experts in tennis, were asking questions to help the players analyze their own game and improve.

While Integrity and Fairness, and to some degree competence are essential, what matters at the end is, does the coach really believe in the **potential of the coachee** (person being coached), and does she **care** about the coachee.

Carl Rogers and others evolved a whole new branch of counseling based on their “client centred approach.” The corner stone of their approach is a firm belief in the ability of the coachee to find solutions to her own problem, non-judgmental attitude of the coach and unconditional positive regard for the coachee.

It is not enough for the coach to say, “I care.” He must be able to demonstrate his caring. The work of Rogers and others has helped us to understand how caring is demonstrated by individuals. Some key skills in demonstrating caring are:

Listening & Observation: Both to what is being said and what is not being said, what is visible and what is not visible. An example is the Hindi lyric, “*Tum itna kyon muskura rahe ho, kya gam hai jisko chupa rahe ho*” (Why are you smiling so much, what is that pain that you are hiding so much”) In one budget finalization meeting in March in a MNC bank I was happy to see that the usually vocal dissenter was quickly accepting the new stretched targets. The CEO advised me to have a one-on-one chat with him. Sure enough, the CEO’s hunch was right. This person was planning to put in his papers and take up an offer from a rival bank.

Empathy: Putting yourself in the other’s shoes and understanding his feelings. Implicit in this is the assumption that you cannot wear another’s shoes first. Many organizations like South West Airlines have “Shoes” program that enables employees to actually do the work of another. In one particularly contentious Collective Bargaining Agreement I got the Union and the Management team to do a role reversal. After some hesitation both sides started passionately advocating changed position. While this session led to a lot of laughter and mirth, it changed the previous adversarial stance based on low trust and low agreement.

Respect: Respect is to show through one’s behaviour that each person is unique. Carl Rogers calls it unconditional positive regard. In looking at things we often miss out the uniqueness of the individual. Imagine rating Sachin Tendulkar on the basis of his class 10th marks! We will completely miss out the genius in him if we look at him only through the prism of scholastic achievements. Yet, in organizations, often we do not see people beyond appraisal ratings.

Genuineness: One of the most difficult of skills for the coach is to be genuine, or being one’s true self. Saying what we do and doing what we say. This does not mean unrestrained expression without caring for others feelings. Genuineness or authenticity

is an attribute that marks all great leaders – from Gandhi to Martin Luther King. I am asked: how can one be genuine with one's boss who wields disproportionate power? There are horror stories of what happened when one tried being genuine. My first boss was one such boss. The very first time I tried giving him some feedback he told me, "You are not paid to think." (Remember thinker-doer assumption). For eight months I sat in front of his cabin rising only to say, "Yes sir, yes sir, 3 bags full sir". As I was narrating my woes to a friend he told me a story I still remember. In a farming community where cattle used to run over fences and graze on crops, one farmer had the brainwave of electrifying his fence. This was before the days of free electricity for farmers. Others could not understand how this farmer was able to pay his electricity bills. When asked the revealed his secret. "The fence was electrified only for the first two days. After that the cattle did not notice the difference." My friend asked me how many times I had tried touching my boss's fence after the first electric shock I got!

In one company known for its tough no nonsense CEO, managers would often use his secretary to pass on bad news. How is the secretary able to give bad news to this boss when others hesitate? Just as genuineness builds trust, it is easier to be genuine if there is high level of trust.

In workshops on coaching when we talk about building trust, a common question from participants is whether their bosses have attended this workshop. This seems to imply that one cannot be a good coach if one's boss and other senior managers are not role modeling appropriate coaching behaviors. This thought process robs us of our own free will to make a difference. Think of people who inspired us to give our best. Chances are these people did not wait for their bosses to inspire them. Coaching is an act of service and true coaching happens when the coach genuinely believes in the process and finds it meaningful.

Organizations can do a lot to promote a coaching culture. When IBM wanted to increase coaching style among managers, as opposed to just task orientation, they introduced coaching as a part of their competency model which was the basis for assessment, rewards and career planning. In a subsequent employee survey they found that coaching style has increased by 17 per cent and pace setting style decreased by 5 per cent. Motorola developed an innovative program that trains and certifies internal "master coaches" in 9 countries on 4 continents. The certification process of master coaches involved external consultants reviewing internal confidential survey and phone interviews of coaches, journal review of master coach candidates, and competency based interviews.

Consulting companies like McKinsey has identified coaching as a core business strategy. Coaching is being encouraged for specific target groups like women. GE Women's Network is a voluntary organization within GE promoting coaching of high potential women to enable them to take up senior leadership roles.

After extensive benchmarking, Intel developed its own coaching and mentoring program in 1999. It is a program that matches a coach and coachee based upon 1-3

specific skills for a defined time period. Sapiient has identified coaches at project level who provide short-term development inputs.

Building trust is only the first step in the coaching process. Trust is not an objective by itself. The objective of the coach is to help the coachee unlock and maximize his potential. And this calls for feedback skills, challenge and confrontation where required.

The next part of the article discusses the skills required by a coach to convert potential to performance.

One turning point in my life came six months into my first job after completing my MA in personnel management. I was the HR executive in an engineering company. My division, which manufactured motors, was making huge losses. On January of that year the general manager of the division called me and asked, "What is your assessment of the impact you have made in the last six months?" I talked about the training programs I had done and the changes in HR policies I had initiated. "What has been the impact of all that on the business," he persisted. Getting increasingly uncomfortable I started talking about how the impact of HR has to be seen in the long term. "What will help us in the short term?" His questions were relentless. "In the short term, we will have to make our manufacturing viable," I said. "Good. From tomorrow you will be a part of the coil making section of our manufacturing. We have a rigid union there. Your HR background will help. "With a nod he indicated that the conversation was at an end.

In those days it was not the norm to argue with one's boss, leave alone the boss's boss. All my preparation till that time was towards being an HR professional. In one moment my GM was asking me to forget all that and plunge into an unknown area. I am not an engineer, though I vaguely remembered reading about motors in my physics class. If I hadn't made a great impact in HR what would my chances be in manufacturing? My GM must have seen the color drain out of my face, for he suddenly became gentle. "This is a temporary transfer. We will bring you back in the new financial year. Meanwhile, this is a great opportunity to learn about the heart of the business." I had at least two options that day. One shift to manufacturing and learn something absolutely new. Two, circulate my CV and escape while there was still time (before I was perceived as a failed experiment). I decided to give manufacturing chance. In three months, not only did I pick up the nuances of the manufacturing process, I was able to develop adequate rapport with the union to influence productivity norms. More importantly, I got rid of my self-imposed label of an HR professional. Years later, when I was a consultant helping a client reengineer their manufacturing process, this experience in manufacturing was invaluable. I believe my decision to stay back was influenced by a host of factors. One important factor was trust. Though I was not sure of what was in store for me, I was willing to trust my GM's judgment. In the previous part of this article I have talked about the importance of building trusting relationships for effective coaching. However, building trust is not the end objective of coaching. It is a necessary, but not sufficient condition.

The objective of coaching is to build capability in the person. To do this, the coach often has to give feedback that may not be pleasant. He has to cut through the superficial and hold a mirror to the coachee which enables the coachee to see the contradictions in her own behaviour. When the coach “**confronts**” a coachee, he is bringing to the front, contradictions in her behaviour. This is different from the usual meaning of the term confrontation. An example of this is in the movie Lagaan when the protagonist Bhuvan (Amir Khan) takes up the challenge of playing a cricket match against the British, on the condition that if his side wins there will be no tax for three years. Bhuvan organizes a practice match for his team and the whole village turns up to watch. Badly in need of an additional player Bhuvan decides to induct Kachra who is an untouchable. In a vivid scene, the entire team refuses to play with Kachra and Bhuvan’s confrontation is a high point of the film, where he highlights contradictions in the behaviour of his team members and the villagers. For instance, they worship Lord Ram who did not believe in untouchability. Similarly, winning the match was a matter of life and death for the villagers, yet they were fighting over the inclusion of Kachra in the team, as if it were a routine match being played for their entertainment. The end result is that the villagers and the team members realize their mistake and resolve to play together with Kachra in the team. The outcome of confrontation is critical to a successful coaching session. There are many managers who take pride in ‘calling a spade a spade.’ But of what use is calling a spade a spade if it does not lead to new awareness in the coachee and if the coachee does not take responsibility for change. This is why trust is such an important pre condition for confrontation in coaching.

Feedback is not all about confrontation. In a coaching context, feedback is often given by asking the right questions. The problem with feedback is that it is often not received without distortion. Let me prove this to you. Think of what comes to your mind when you hear the following words; cat, pillow, ice, cow....

When I ask this to different people the answers could be different. Someone can respond to the four words by saying mouse, soft, cold, bull etc. Rarely would someone answer cat, pillow, ice and cow. Why it is that the mind often thinks of something else when in fact the ears are hearing something different? This is because the human brain has a tendency to associate any new input with something existing. This is also the reason why people often do not hear feedback with an open mind. In fact, the chances of the end of the year feedback, which is linked to appraisal ratings, being received without editing are remote.

What, then, is the alternative? If telling does not work, asking might. Asking **open-ended questions** might help better in creating self-awareness than giving feedback by telling. John Whitmore, in his book ‘*Coaching for Performance*’ gives a simple four step process for coaching which can be used for asking the right questions.

Consider the case of a very senior executive, a lateral recruit to an established organization in the metals business. This person has a sales experience and as a part of his career plan has been positioned as number two in the manufacturing unit. In three months he has come to the conclusion that the existing culture did not accept him. People were disdainful of his lack of technical expertise in metals manufacturing.

Additionally, the hierarchical culture had come in the way of establishing one on one relationship with key functional heads who preferred to communicate with the manufacturing head. When this person goes to discuss his frustrations with his boss, his boss might ask questions like the following if she were to follow the process:

Goal: What would you like to accomplish in this current role? How would you know you are successful? What could be some other goals that might conflict with the above?

Reality: What is your assessment of the factors which are helping you in moving towards your goal? What is coming in the way? What could be the root cause of success or failure in moving towards your goal?

Options: How would you be able to use the current advantages that you have? What will be some ways to neutralize what is coming in the way? What are the best options for you?

Will: What will be done? By when? How will it be done?

The above is also known as the GROW model. Unlike reaching or mentoring, in coaching situations, most often, the solutions are within the coachee himself. And there is no one right solution. The coach can share her experience. She can also conduct a successful coaching dialogue by just asking the right questions. To be able to conduct a successful coaching session without being tempted to offer helpful suggestions requires a deep belief in the potential of the person being coached. Successful coaches are good at assuming that the coachee has the potential and in communicating their faith in the coachee's potential.

The following story from 'Born to Win' is relevant. The writers have paraphrased James Aggrey's 'The parable of the eagle', and I am building on it.

A naturalist while going through rural India came across a farmer's barnyard. There were a number of chickens and one young eagle. Not having seen such a mix before, the naturalist asked the farmer, "What is an eagle doing amongst chickens?" It is a chicken," the farmer replied. They had a long argument at the end of which it was decided that the naturalist would prove it was an eagle by asking the bird to fly. For two days the naturalist tried in vain. On both occasions the bird refused to believe the naturalist, and preferred to play with his friends, the chickens. The farmer, the more practical of the two explained, "All its life it has been with the chickens, fed on the same chicken feed, played with them, and deep in its heart it believes it is a chicken."

The next day the naturalist took the young eagle to the top of the nearby mountain range, and said, "You are an eagle, the kind of birds. You belong to both the earth and the sky. I am a naturalist. I recognize your potential to fly. Raise forth your wings and fly." As the naturalist raised the eagle high up in the air, the eagle caught the glint of morning sunshine in its eye; it quivered, trembled slightly, and with a triumphant cry, started to fly.

It flew high over hills and vales and saw sights and heard sounds it had never seen or heard before.

Maybe, the eagle comes back sometimes to visit his friends, the chickens. But in his heart, he knows he is an eagle. He has realized his potential. The coach has to recognize the potential, just as the naturalist did in this case.

I however like to add a slight twist at the end. My story ends like this.

The other day, I met the naturalist at a bar in Mumbai. I have always been intrigued about an eagle living with chickens? Curious, I could not stop myself from asking, "Are you sure it was an eagle?" The naturalist looked at me with an enigmatic smile, gulped her drink down, and said, "It's doesn't matter."

Like the naturalist, if you have to ignite minds for harnessing the potential, you have to believe in the potential first.

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