

Coaching With Rapport

by Anna Carroll

Coaching & Work Don't Seem to Mix

When most people think about coaching experiences they've had, they rarely refer to work! A memory of being on a little league team or coaching one is one image some have. Another is high school or college sports. Another may be a vocal music coach, drama coach or tennis or golf pro. With sports activities there may be pleasant memories and the feeling of *wanting* to improve. Or you may be helping people who are already motivated learn how to improve. All of these images are in sharp contrast to how we think of the work setting, even when the word "coaching" is used.

We hear a lot in leadership courses and in books about managers as coaches and yet it feels a lot less fun than tennis or singing or baseball. The mandate seems to come out of pressure to produce more with less rather than improvement for the fun of it. Individuals and teams must work in a new fast-paced environment where downsizing, greater spans of reporting relationships, and the need for employees to be technical experts on their own may exist. Managers are asked to operate more as coaches and "empower" others to do the job.

While all of these factors may be true, the real question is, "What will make this new coaching role actually work in day-to-day life?" We're told that leaders are now coaches, but this comes on top of:

- the increased complexity of the processes we supervise
- a demand that leaders be technical experts in many areas
- a focus on lowered costs and less dedicated support services
- an overall pressure for everyone in the workplace to work longer hours and accomplish more
- the reality that many are working longer hours and feel stressed
- the information revolution speeding up the pressures to compete

All of these pressures make it harder for us to schedule time to coach our employees. Furthermore, we have often gotten ahead personally because of our own technical expertise rather than by communication and coaching with individuals. Since we are self-starters and may have initiated much of our own development, we tend to underestimate the need to allocate time to coach others. There may be a feeling of, "Why don't they just get it?" At least at times when we're under stress, it's hard to be patient with sitting down and helping individuals walk through the steps that will help them improve their impact.

Why Coach?

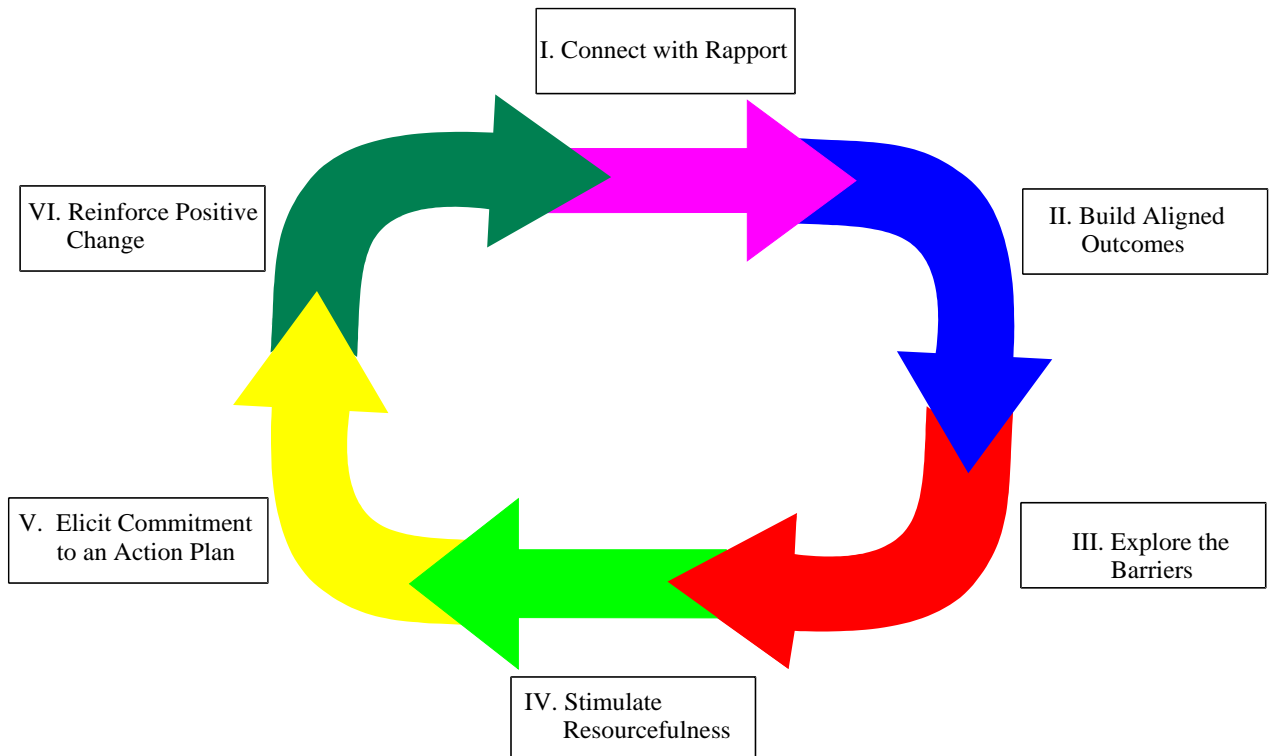
Although we may not feel we have time to allocate the time and effort to coaching, we're kind of stuck with it. It's one of the highest leverage ways of increasing the resource base of the company, delegating work to others, and truly empowering our employees to take on the business of doing our business.

How can we go about coaching that is most effective and is a good use of our time and our effort? The good news about coaching is that once you learn and practice techniques that deliver results it actually requires *less* energy and less feeling of being drained and exhausted than almost any other method of managing others. The bad news is that effective coaching often involves *unlearning* old ways of managing, leading, and coordinating the work of others. Coaching is deceptively simple, but it often means letting go of the old habits and behavior that leave others in a more dependent role.

Outlined below are six steps that lead you through effective coaching and delivering powerful results to the organization or to your personal life. After all, coaching can be used for helping colleagues, friends, family members, and others outside the work environment, because the same rules apply.

The Coaching Cycle

The cycle below is a simple process for dealing with almost any kind of goal or problem that could come up in a coaching experience:



Let's take a look at each of these steps and see what they mean.

I. Connect with Rapport

Most of you have gotten to where you are today by being relatively good at rapport. In other words, when you go to a meeting or meet a new person you may chitchat about non-business issues, ask questions about their interests, or comment on sports, weather, or other topics that may develop a friendly bond between the two of you. In addition, you probably “read” the other person relatively well and get a sense of whether they understand or agree with what you’re saying. All of these are aspects of rapport. In addition, there may be rapport skills that are critical to excellent coaching that you may be unaware of.

Rapport is an absolute prerequisite for good coaching. When you think of the people that are excellent coaches, you may think of people who really seem to listen and really seem to understand you and your unique interests and needs. This is the heart of rapport building. When someone is in rapport with you they really are sensing the world in the way that you are sensing it and therefore they do understand the world similarly. When someone is out of rapport, you get the feeling that they do not understand your thoughts or feelings and that they are more concerned with their own thoughts and feelings.

10 Ways to Increase Rapport

Focused Eye Contact: While you don’t want to make someone uncomfortable by staring them down, it’s important to establish eye contact and sustain it a few seconds longer than you are used to doing it. Have you ever felt that someone was out of rapport with you because they simply weren’t looking at you at all while you were talking? You may have had a boss, customer, or other business contact who spent almost all the time looking away and therefore making you feel uncomfortable. The cycle for most normal eye contact is a few seconds of eye contact followed by looking away, a few more seconds of eye contact followed by looking away, etc. What works really effectively is to maintain eye contact a few seconds longer than you normally do. Practice having your eye contact linger 1, 2, 3, even 5 seconds longer and notice the effectiveness with other people. You may practice on family members and outside friends, as well as people in your organization.

Listening Without Interrupting: This is really a great gift you can give another person. The person being coached will become more and more comfortable expressing their own thoughts and feelings without a fear that they will be shut down, interrupted, corrected, or not listened to. The more you make it clear that you are not going to interrupt their flow of thoughts, the more relaxed they become and the easier it is for the person to unload their true ways of seeing the world. It may be frustrating for some of us who have become successful by our fast-paced directive style. One way to relax and become less frustrated is deep diaphragmatic breathing. Another is to completely focus on what the other person is saying with no rehearsal of an answer or a suggestion. Allow a few seconds after a person finishes a sentence or a thought in order for them to continue

without interruption. Finally, if necessary, count to 5 between their sentences to make sure you don't jump in with a quick retort.

Backtracking or Paraphrasing: Backtracking is when you actually repeat some of the person's words to check for understanding and to show them that you heard what they said. Paraphrasing is similar, but is actually changing the words into your own words. The difference is really interesting when it comes to rapport building because some people respond better to backtracking and others respond better to paraphrasing. Notice what you feel more comfortable with and then begin to test out one or the other with the people you coach. If for instance, you paraphrase and the person corrects what you said then try direct backtracking. It may seem silly that you are just parroting what they say, and you fear they will be offended by this, but once you become experienced with it you'll see that people actually like to hear their own words repeated and that they feel understood with backtracking. Paraphrasing may work better with other people.

Matching Voice and Posture: This is a hard technique to teach others. Matching or adopting similar characteristics of the other person's voice and posture is something that all of us do naturally when we're in rapport. It's easy to go away with the impression that it is simply a "monkey-see-monkey-do" game, which is certainly not the case. When you are in deep rapport with another individual, your posture, breathing, etc. actually do begin to match the other's. Scientific studies have shown this repeatedly. However, this matching of behavior is not a copy-cat game. It's more subtle than that and if you do it with a focus on being in tune or in synch with the other person, it can be extremely effective. If the person you're coaching talks really slowly, slow down your speech somewhat. Likewise, if they talk quietly, or excitedly.

Showing Empathy: If the person you're coaching says "That meeting was stressful and a waste of time!" you can say "Yeah, it's worse than standing in a two hour line at the IRS." Take the experience or feeling that they are describing and make an analogy or a little scenario that illustrates that same feeling in a different and more exaggerated setting. This can convey great rapport and feelings that you really understand how they're feeling. Other examples:

When the person says: "I'm really tired after that whole ordeal."

The coach says: "Yeah, it's like finishing the Boston Marathon and wanting to collapse at the finish line"

Or, when the person says: "Everyone's so loud in my work environment."

The coach can say: "Sounds like working in a fire station."

Other ways to show empathy are one-liners such as "Yuck, I'm sorry to hear that," or "What a feeling of accomplishment!"

Avoiding the urge to pull them onto your map too early or too often: This is one of those un-learning points and one of the hardest to overcome. The more empathetic we try to be the more we want to share our own experiences with others. Jumping too early from listening to relating your own experience (that may or may not have been similar) is sometimes a turn-off. Very often our “map” is actually different than the other person’s and when we start expressing things that aren’t felt or experienced by the other person, a real disconnect or distancing is created. An example would be an employee talking about a feeling that there’s no room to advance in the company and the coach quickly jumping into an analogy of starting fifteen years ago when times were tough and there were no advancement positions for a couple of years. This may be a turn-off; whether or not it’s a fact, the other person may perceive that fifteen years ago, there were many more opportunities in the business world and that somehow the current climate is different. Whether or not it’s an objective fact is less important than that the person feels that today’s careers are limited. It’s best to hear out and really explore their perceptions before providing your own background on it.

Responsive facial expressions: This is one that comes naturally to most people. The only warning signal here is for folks who don’t realize that they tend to frown or avoid smiling. You may want to ask your friends and colleagues about whether you smile or not. You may not be aware of the fact that people--particularly people you’re coaching--may be intimidated; when they tell you about a problem or a concern, you may not seem warm and available to them because of your facial expression. So for people who tend to hold back on head nodding and facial expressions, it’s a good thing to begin to practice. Ask your friends about how responsive you appear at meetings.

Asking questions to clarify. Don’t assume: After listening, open-ended questioning is the best all-around communication technique. However, the questions need to reflect real interest in what the person is saying. Ask for examples that would help you understand. As soon as the person mentions a problem or issue that you think you recognize, avoid the temptation to jump in and assume that you understand what they’re saying. Make sure you get details when vague words and phrases come up. “Communication” can mean anything, as in: “I don’t feel that our team is communicating enough.” Another example could be: “I’m all alone with this tough assignment.” or “Terry’s pulling in a different direction from where I’m going on this project.” Other ones would be: “Marketing is always changing things.” or “Product Development people are not flexible with meeting customer needs.” All of these things need a lot more clarification and it’s utterly essential for you to avoid injecting any kinds of content into the matter, before asking open-ended and friendly questions to gain their perceptions.

Reading body language for disagreement or confusion: There’s a certain way any individual’s facial expression or even posture will indicate confusion or disagreement with what someone is saying. Most of us are fairly good at “reading” our boss’s face for his or her lack of approval or disagreement with something. However, it’s important to try to get as good at reading others’ expressions and interpreting these correctly. The way

to practice is to note their facial expression when you know they agree with something and also note their facial expression when you know they disagree with something or are confused by something. Then later when you see a confused expression, you can read it accurately and stop to clarify their confusion or misunderstanding.

Modifying your approach: This may seem obvious, but all of us can do more to be more flexible communicators when we are in natural rapport with the other person. Rapport normally happens quite frequently for everyone. If you realize mid-sentence that someone is confused or disagreeing with something, stop yourself. Ask a question to get their reaction and consider modifying how you are communicating in order to send a more effective message. When you are out of rapport with someone and keep going on the path you are currently on, you are actually distancing yourself further and creating more misunderstanding. An example would be continuing to justify yourself over and over about something that you did, even after you realize that the other person is completely upset and has hurt feelings. The more you continue on the same track, the further the gap in rapport you will be establishing. Better communication is facilitated by stopping and asking them about their perceptions and feelings.

II. Build Aligned Outcomes

An outcome is a goal that the person you are coaching sets for the future. However, there are lots of different kinds of goals and some are “aligned” and others aren’t. To be truly achievable, an outcome is best stated in terms of what the person can do and is in control of rather than what others do or are in control of. In other words, if the person you’re coaching complains about co-workers, the lack of advancement in the company, or the myriad of other forces that lie outside his or her own control, they will become frustrated if they’re not able to change those circumstances. On the other hand, if the goal can be reframed in terms of an action or a way of thinking that that person is in control of, the person can take charge of making the outcome a reality.

If the behavior of co-workers is presented as the problem, it’s important for you to help the individual concentrate on the individual’s own actions or reactions vs. trying to change the behavior of the co-workers. This is not to say that a manager should not address issues with co-workers or with the whole team if these are a problem. But in coaching the individual, the only thing that can be effective is helping the individual become empowered to make changes that will affect his or her perception of the behavior that is a problem. This applies in all kinds of goals and outcomes you may be presented with. An individual who feels stymied by the job role she or he is in currently can be helped to shift their focus onto what actions, training, preparation, initiatives that person can take to enhance the job role, rather than it being up to you or the organization to place them in a new position (unless, of course, that’s a viable option.)

The way that you can help the person reframe the outcome in terms of what they can actually do is to simply ask “Is this in your control?” “Is this something that you have the

power to change?” “Can we restate the goal in terms of something you can control?” “Can you state that in terms of yourself?”

Another condition of an aligned outcome is that it be stated positively. In other words instead of something like “I want to stop getting so mad at my peer in the lab.” You can help the person state it in terms of “I want to choose a better response when I feel frustrated with my co-workers. Or “I want to remain calm when other people make me feel stressed.” In order to coach on building a positive outcome, you may simply ask “Can we restate that in the positive?” “Is there a way to turn that around and have you choose a positive response in those situations?”

Alignment is ensuring that the goal or outcome is complementary with the goals of the organization, with their goals for family, health, etc. In other words, the person may want to do something that is not really going to have a positive impact on the organization, and you as coach can help them reframe the goal in terms of something that is valuable to the organization.

Ultimately, however, if the goal is deeply felt and ultimately would take them away from contributing to the organization, your job is to draw out these values and thoughts so that they can set a goal that may indeed lead them to eventually quitting if this is their heartfelt dream. For instance, the person may feel very frustrated by the job and they have gone through a number of steps to try to enhance their job role. After both you and the person have done everything possible to enhance the role and it’s clear that they want a path in an entirely different profession or career, it would be helpful to help the individual express those strong desires and see the need to take steps in realizing their dream.

Usually the alignment issue is a very positive one because it’s easy to see that many of the solutions to their frustrations and even career needs are very much in synch with the needs of the organization. Another area of alignment might have to do with the person adopting a goal such as getting an MBA in one year, which would involve a massive amount of stress and possible consequences. As a coach, you can ask questions such as “How will this affect your health?” “How will this affect your family?” after you’ve dealt with the issue of how it’s going to affect the work setting itself.

As you can see, there are many areas of alignment that you can help them explore. Once the person understands the possible areas of alignment, they’re usually quite cooperative in admitting that they need to consider these things. Finally, it’s really important to make sure that the goal or outcome is the proper “size” for workability. In other words, if the outcome is over-arching or grandiose, it will be hard for them to achieve it on a timely basis and feel good about it. You might help the person break down such a large goal into workable chunks. By the same token, some people have goals that are too narrow and specific and will lead to frustration if they can’t be achieved exactly in the form that they target. An example would be someone who wants a very specific job description as a next step, rather than to enhance their skills so that that or other options become available

to them. As you can see there are many things to think about when helping someone form a goal. If you can help the individual build an outcome that meet these criteria, you will be half-way there in helping them actually achieve something meaningful.

III. Explore the Barriers

Once you have helped the person state an aligned outcome, now you're ready to help them understand what they need to do to achieve it. Instead of jumping right into a game plan, however, it's important to help them understand barriers that may have prevented them from achieving this goal so far. These barriers may fall into several categories:

- Knowledge gap
- Skill gap
- Belief gap

It's interesting to note that while knowledge and skill gaps can indeed be barriers to people achieving their goals, what really hampers them are their beliefs about themselves or about the world. These beliefs or attitudes hinder their ability to acquire the requisite knowledge or skills. For example, if the person has a belief that they are bad at math and it's tough for them to learn financial practices, then they will have trouble asking others for what kind of courses or skills they need to gain more financial capabilities. It may come to you as "I just don't know what courses to take" or "I don't know what financial skills are needed for the job." In another knowledge area, they may present the problem as a kind of a simple logistical "I don't know who to talk to" problem when it may boil down to a belief problem that has hampered them in getting the right logistical information to date. Therefore, you can most fruitfully explore all of these levels of barriers. So often, we as coaches dispense knowledge and information quickly and then wonder why people don't take that advice and take action. Your role as coach can very fruitfully be applied to helping people explore their beliefs about their own capabilities and help them gain a more positive outlook.

To do this effectively requires a lot of listening, a lot of patience, and a lot of probing questions. Some of these questions might be: "What do you think is stopping you from achieving this outcome?" A next questions would be: "What are your beliefs or opinions about this situation?" "Where are these 'shoulds' and 'musts' coming from?" "What would happen if you had a different belief about your ability in this area?" "What would happen if you had a different belief about what others 'should do'?" "Tell me about what you've done so far to achieve this outcome?" "Why has this worked or not worked?" "Can you give me a story about when you tried to achieve this outcome?" "What was hardest for you?" People often have rigid rules for themselves or others that are accompanied by "should", "must" or "have to". It's your job to help them see how they may be hindering their own progress and applying their rigid rules to themselves or other people and getting in the way of achieving positive results. This may seem to require a great deal of skill on your part, but it is mostly a listening and questioning process that

you will get better at over time. This is the time when too much advice from you can get in the way of the person realizing what their own barrier to success is.

It's okay at this point to tell a few stories about how you or others have explored and clarified barriers. However, make sure your words are not too prescriptive, such as "So you need to go do this too." You may want to use the phrase: "This may or may not be helpful to you, but here's my experience." Or "A barrier that someone else I was coaching had a few years ago was 'x'. If they seem to reject the example or idea, quickly go back to open-ended questioning and find out how they think or feel about the situation. Very often, just a full and deep discussion about their perceived barriers will help them gain a new insight about how they approach or attack it in a new way.

Giving Feedback: If you are the other person's manager, or if you can provide helpful objective feedback, this is the time in which it may be helpful to provide performance feedback. However, true coaching involves continued rapport and trust and it's important to make sure the feedback is perceived as helpful to the individual. Now that you've elicited an aligned outcome in terms of something they really want to do or achieve, this feedback will usually be well received because it will be in the context of what's holding them back from achieving *their* goal.

IV. Stimulate Resourcefulness

Here's where the two of you can come up with all kinds of alternatives, with an emphasis on the alternatives generated by the other person. You may want to at this point also include positive feedback, reminding them of ways they've handled other situations positively in the past and reminding them of their positive capabilities that can help them address the goal or outcome. This step as well as the last step on barriers may require several discussions to be fully explored. Some useful questions are: "What are some things you could do to move forward with this?" "What are some ways to get past these barriers?" "Who would be helpful to you in learning about solutions or skills you need?" "What are some things you could work on in the next few weeks to make progress on this outcome?" "If you looked at this issue in a completely different way, what would be a 'crazy' solution?" "What are you willing to challenge yourself to do in order to really achieve this outcome?" You may want to help the person record their solutions on paper, a white board or flip chart during the discussion so they see the full range of possibilities they are generating.

V. Elicit Commitment to an Action Plan

This is one that can slip away from us when we have made a big breakthrough. The person as well as the coach gains a whole new insight about what the barriers are and how to overcome the barriers. This is the lesson that managers learn again and again when they learn the lesson of goals, and of specific, recordable, doable plans. This means breaking down ideas into workable actions starting with what the person is going to do when they walk out of your conference room or office today. What specifically are they

going to be doing in the next week, in the next month, in the next three months, and in the next year? How will they track what they're doing and get subsequent coaching assistance from you? When are planning your next coaching session with them? How can they build toward the desired results for a conversation they are planning to have this afternoon? Having a brilliant problem-solving session and breakthrough identification process may be very helpful. However, unless specific words are said or approaches used with appropriate inside or outside parties, nothing will change. Therefore, it's important that you as the coach take on the role of leading the individual to commit to one or more specific steps.

If the action plan that is being committed to by the individual involves a tough conversation with one or more people, it's very helpful if you role-play or rehearse the approach they will be taking. Be very, very gentle in any critique you give. Phrase any suggestions as "Another approach you may want to consider saying that is..." or "A helpful approach may be...". Compliment the person on the parts of their approach which seem to be most effective.

VI. Reinforce Positive Change

This again is one that seems obvious, but may be underestimated. It's very important with any new behavior to reinforce it strongly at first and in small increments. If you are coaching an employee and you notice that they are speaking up more at meetings in order to get clarification and help the team accelerate their planning, speak up early and often just to support this effort and acknowledge the person for making the positive changes. If this is done well, the individual draws all kinds of good conclusions about the value of making this effort. If it is *not* reinforced, the employee draws the conclusion that no matter what they do, nothing has changed. Why bother with the tough new changes?

It may be hard to really understand or appreciate just how influential we as a coach might be in this person's life. For instance, if you are the individual's manager, every word you say, every hint that you make about the future, every cryptic comment about relations with other departments, or potential restructuring has a massive impact. Individuals hearing you make these statements are making decisions based on hearing your views, so use your influence wisely! It's important to maintain your bond of rapport and ask about changes that might be affecting this person's relationship with an individual co-worker, family, or with a particular part of their work process in which they have complete control. Ask about what they're doing. Compliment them on the successes and be empathetic when there are setbacks. They will definitely get the message that their goal is important. Both you and the person you coach will grow and change positively throughout this coaching process.