

# WHAT IS COACHING?

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Coaching has long been associated with many fields of action in which there is a concern for performance. In order to perform effectively, we need to know which actions to take and how to coordinate them in a way to achieve our desired outcome. While all this sounds straightforward enough, if we observe our business practices (a set of coordinated actions) carefully, we will notice the following:

- < Much of what we do is habitual and unexamined.
- < Even though we may have years of experience, few of us have developed an effective practice of learning from that experience.
- < When we find a successful approach, business practice or strategy, there is a tendency to 'hold on' to this way of doing things even when the business environment around us has changed and demands new ways of working.

Often an intervention is required in order for us to recognize what has become habitual in our ways of working, the limitations of our point of view or how a shift in perspective may open new possibilities for effective action. In other words, we can often help each other in ways that we cannot help ourselves! This is one of the basic premises upon which the new practice of coaching is based. Coaching is a learning partnership - a partnership between the coach and their learning partner/performer.

As a performer I am able to see certain possibilities for myself in a specific field of action. Given those possibilities, I am then able to see certain actions I can take and others I can't take.

However, in both the performer's horizon of possibilities and in their repertoire of actions there is another important category - which includes possibilities and actions that are not available to the performer, in that they are simply not seen. We refer to these 'unseen' possibilities and actions as 'blind spots'. A blind spot is always a blind spot for a particular observer (a particular way of looking at things). If you are driving a car and about to change lanes, you check your blind spot and if you are still uncertain, you may ask a passenger to also check your blind spot for you. The point is that a blind spot for you (a particular observer) may not be a blind spot for someone else

(a different observer). This opens a new possibility for generating performance - coaching.

A coach is someone who is a different observer, someone who is able to show us possibilities that we don't see for ourselves, possibilities that are beyond the horizon of possibilities that we have for ourselves at our current stage of development.

Just being a different observer is not enough however in order to be effective as a coach. A coach must be able to; establish trust with the performer, make rigorous observations of performance, assess relevance and effectiveness of both actions taken and possible new actions, intervene in ways that show the performer new possibilities for themselves, respect the autonomy and dignity of the performer to make choices for themselves and leave the performer 'in action'.

Our strong tradition of individualism in the West (The Lone Ranger, Wonder Woman, Superman, etc.) often leads us to conclude that we can do it ourselves and don't need any help or coaching. However the time for coaching and social learning has come! It is evident if we survey Olympic athletes, sports teams, the performing arts, etc. that coaching plays a vital role in accomplishment. Competitive businesses are now beginning to adopt this approach to generating new levels of performance.

## **TRADITIONAL APPROACHES TO IMPROVING PERFORMANCE**

***Professional Advisors*** - When we need to know something and we don't have the specialized knowledge or expertise, we often go to someone who has this expertise (i.e. a technical hotline, a lawyer, professional money manager, etc.) In these cases we are not learning a new proficiency, i.e. we are not actually becoming a technician, lawyer, etc., but dealing with a specific situation in which we need to act and require advice.

***Teachers*** - When we want to perform in a new domain of action we can use a teacher to introduce us to the fundamental distinctions in that domain. For example, if I wanted to learn to play chess I could ask someone who is proficient in chess to teach me the basics. I would need to learn things like the names of the pieces - King, Queen, Rook, etc., the various moves they are able to make, the board the game is played on, the objective of the game - to capture your opponent's king, etc. At advanced levels I can learn various strategies, styles of play, etc.

***Mentors*** - Traditionally mentors have acted as a sponsor, on behalf of their protege, assisting them with their careers and learning the appropriate ways of behaving in the organization. Currently mentoring is being redefined and expanded into new areas e.g. technical mentoring. While mentoring primarily relies on a transfer of a pre-existing knowledge or expertise, coaching has an emphasis on generating new insights and action (see below 'The Power of Coaching'). The new art of coaching has a key role to play in the renewal of mentoring.

***Trainers*** - When we decide to get in shape (mentally or physically) we need to go on a training program which will bring about a change in our capacity for action through exercise and repetition. A competent trainer can assist us in designing and implementing such a program.

## **A NEW WAY OF PLAYING THE GAME - THE POWER OF COACHING**

***Coaching*** - While there are many interpretations of what coaching is, we distinguish coaching as an approach to learning and generating performance, that is based on our human capacity to observe ourselves, to question what we see and to choose whether or not we want to change. A coach assists us in seeing ourselves in ways that allow us to expand our horizon of possibilities and increase our capacity for action, learning and development. In many coaching situations, the coach isn't teaching us new competencies, but is assisting us in using competencies we already have in new ways to produce new outcomes.

Performers engaged in purposeful activity experience breakdowns in achieving what they want. Breakdowns often result from limitations in our 'way of seeing things' or our 'way of doing things' - or more generally from our 'way of being'. This is precisely because our way of being is familiar to us, comfortable (even if this way of being is complaining about being uncomfortable) and very often automatic (a response waiting for a stimulus). The coach is there to assist the performer in reflecting on the way they are seeing things, in questioning their habitual way of doing things, exploring possibilities and possible actions and to support and respect the autonomy of the performer in making their own free choice.