

Coaching Vs. Counseling

A TRAINING MANUAL PROVIDED BY



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WHAT IS COACHING?

Think of your staff as a team.

When a coach works with their team they don't just tell them their position and then send them out onto the field. A coach organizes practice sessions, encourages the players, gives them their playbook so they can strategize, watches tape of their performances with them so that they can see where they could have veered left instead of right.

A coach is just as active a member of the team as any player. While they may be standing on their sidelines, their role is to observe and react. To see how the other team, in this case our customers, responds to the plays used and provide the team with the tools needed to find the way through to them.

A coach provides feedback in the moment so that future opportunities are not lost. And then follows up in more detail later during a practice session to ensure that the lesson of the moment isn't lost.

THIS is your role.

You are the coach of your team. You find the right people and the right positions for them. You train them in your playbook, the knowledge they need to be successful in that role. And then you practice getting ready for the game, where you then observe, recognize, and report on what you see so that you can enhance your player's abilities and possibilities.

Coaching is finding the opportunities in your player's game, and leading them towards the most effective outcome for them and the team as a whole.

Coaching in the Moment

Why is timely feedback the most effective?

The easiest reason for why timely feedback is effective is in the name...it's timely! When something is fresh in your mind it is easy to recall details of the experience, and this is necessary when we are training employees. Not only is it fresh for them, but it is fresh for you so you can specifically point to their exact interaction or action without having to use a generic example.

Plus, if feedback is delivered in the moment, an employee has a chance to modify and practice new behaviors before they learn a bad habit. They say it takes a month to two months to break a bad habit, and another 18 days to develop a new one. Don't let bad behaviors develop into routines, fix issues in the moment.

That said, in the moment does not mean, in front of the customer. Always take an employee aside for coaching conversations. Keep your frontline solid in front of customers.

What does this look like:

Observation	Possible Coaching	Possible Fixes
Customer tells employee they are really enjoying Fantastic Four's latest run. You observe your employee responding that the current series is "absolute trash."	<i>"I know you think that by providing your opinion you are being real with the customer, but by telling the customer you hate the run you have insulted something they said they enjoy and made them uncomfortable."</i>	<i>"If you're really digging the new Fantastic Four, you should check out Volume 3. It's such a cool take on the characters and the art and writing really shine. Let me get you a copy to flip through."</i>

This coaching opportunity directly addresses the exact behavior the employee demonstrated, offers an alternative way to say what they said, and provides a natural segue to selling an item to the customer...which is what a sales associate should be doing! This is what good coaching should look like!

HOW TO GIVE AND RECEIVE FEEDBACK

As managers we have a tendency to think that our management style can be one-size fits all. After all, we're the boss, right? But the truth of the matter is that a rigid manager can cause their team to fall apart.

When first working with an employee, it is helpful to find out how they like to receive their feedback. Of course, no one really LIKES feedback, but as it is our responsibility to coach our team members, we need to know how to best approach them with that information. In the corporate world, they really love to use personality tests to try to squeeze everyone into a box of different behaviors and emotions, but we can do that in a more natural way just by having conversations with our staff members one on one to find the right balance for them.

If an employee says they learn through **comparative behavior**, consider finding examples of how someone else on staff handled a situation that was successful. If someone finds themselves pulled down by that type of feedback, maybe don't point out that they could be better if they emulate someone else's style.

Some employees may learn through experimentation and doing, oftentimes this is well met with a couple of rounds of role-playing potential situations to allow them to see how things might play out based on their and the customers behaviors.

Others still may prefer to see information in writing, learning through text. For these employees, you may want to have copies of training materials available so that they can refresh themselves on what information is best suited for the conversation.

Generational differences also play a big role in how employees receive their feedback or their level of understanding of different things. For example, it may take a person over the age of 55 longer to understand how to use the computer system to order a comic. You may need to start at the very beginning steps of logging on and be prepared to slowly move through each step of the process. On the flip side, a Gen Z teen will probably find your process tedious if you take too long and may get frustrated feeling like you are speaking down to them, so understanding a person's learning style, comprehension style, and communication style all become key factors in providing communication to your team.

Giving Feedback

When it comes to the act of actually administering feedback, it can get a little nerve wracking. You don't want to come off as overbearing or unsupportive, but you want to make sure that your team member knows that the behaviors they are distributing aren't necessarily the best way to go about assisting customers.

So how do you give them feedback that is both helpful and encouraging?

A good place to start is with these five basic steps to giving feedback:

1. **Ensure that the recipient is ready:** When preparing to deliver feedback, it's helpful to verify that the person is ready for the feedback session. Asking a person, "may I give you some feedback on that transaction," is a great way to open them up to the fact that you are about to coach them on the situation. Mr. Rogers used to ask his team if he could "elevate their ideas," which set the stage for the fact that he was going to provide a way to take what they were doing and make it better fit what the expectations were.
2. **Clearly describe the situation:** When giving feedback it is important to provide as many details to the event as possible. This not only helps the associate see that you have a full grasp of the situation, but it also may help them see something they missed when they were going through the motions. This is another reason why coaching in the moment is so important. Details remain fresh to both you and the team member, making the conversation more relevant and easier to dissect.
3. **Present your take:** Remember when presenting your take to use "I" statements. "I noticed this behavior," or "I feel like trying this might." Using I statements helps keep employees from defending their behaviors, while giving you the chance to explain what you saw from the outside and why you feel that something else may be a more beneficial behavior.
4. **Give actionable recommendations:** Simply telling a team member that they did something that doesn't work does not help to improve their future behaviors. It's important when giving feedback to make sure that you give your employee a behavior or series of behaviors that they can try in the future to see greater success.
5. **Talk with people, not at them:** Nothing shuts someone down like feeling like their opinion isn't valued. Let your employee participate in the conversation. You may come up with an even better way to meet your goals as a team when you talk through it together.

The Importance of Positive Feedback

Many times we become too focused on pointing out behaviors that we would like to see team members change, and we forget to recognize the good, and oftentimes, great behaviors that our associates demonstrate.

Celebrating wins, or positive feedback, is a great way to recognize when someone does something well. Positive feedback can help employees feel more motivated to do their job, but it can also help them and others learn and grow from the simple act of calling out that something is a behavior that helps the store, the team, or the customers.

Tips for giving positive feedback:

- **Be specific:** Focus on the action or behavior that you want to recognize. This can be handled as simply as saying, “You did a great job explaining that book to that customer.”
- **Be genuine:** Make sure your associate knows that you are sincere in your support of their behavior.
- **Be timely:** As with any coaching situation you want to make sure that positive feedback is also given as soon as possible so that your team member can remember the behavior and knows that you are paying attention to the work they are doing.
- **Use the what and why method:** Explain to them what impressed you about what they did and why you found it so effective in the moment.
- **Recognize the person:** People want to know that you care about them as an individual on your team, make sure to tailor your feedback to them specifically, and remind them of their personal strengths when you highlight their performance.

Providing positive feedback helps your team members feel more receptive to feedback while also reinforcing the behaviors and skills you want to see continue.

Receiving Feedback

You are also going to need to receive feedback from your team members at times. We all make mistakes and we all have room to learn and grow, how you handle your team members responding to your feedback and providing their own to you speaks volumes to what kind of leader you are and want to be. It is important to learn to listen not for response but for

reception. To see the value in the alternative perspective to what you are doing or providing. And to be prepared to adapt when necessary, just as much as you expect them to.

ACCOUNTABILITY IN ACTION

How do we demonstrate accountability while also building the same expectations in employees?

The word accountability has three major word associations: **responsible, answerable, explainable.**

It's important to keep these words in mind when teaching accountability to your team members:

- 1) **Responsible** - who is responsible for ensuring certain actions get done. How can you take responsibility for action items? How do you take responsibility for your actions? Own it and take it!
- 2) **Answerable** - What answers can you provide for the situation? What solutions are available?
- 3) **Explainable** -Do you understand the reality of the situation? Explain the needed behaviors to rectify the situation and improve the behaviors in the future.

When we can learn that all behaviors impact the situation and that we must own our behaviors and actions we can improve our functionality.

The sooner that we acknowledge our role in situations, the sooner we can find an actual solution. Solution-making and implementation should always be the goal so work to move past denial and blaming and work towards getting things done.

Accountability Ladder:

The Accountability Ladder is a helpful tool when discussing accountability with team members. This guide can work to explain the difference in taking ownership of a situation versus creating excuses that do not actualize solutions for our customers or team.

How can you help associates move from stages like denial or excuses to making it happen?

ACCOUNTABILITY LADDER

Accountable

Self-Victimizing

8. MAKE IT HAPPEN

People in this stage are committed to making things happen whether they are the decision maker or not.

“I got this!”

7. FIND SOLUTIONS

People here actively seek to implement solutions even if they can't directly resolve the problem.

“Here's what I'm going to do!”

6. OWN THE PROBLEM

People in this stage own the problem and honor their responsibilities to the situation.

“This is on me.”

5. FOCUS ON REALITY

People in this stage let go of irrational excuses and look for realistic approaches.

“I should have...”

4. WAIT AND HOPE

People in this stage know there is a problem, but chose to not act, hoping someone else will.

“Maybe it will be fine.”

3. EXCUSES

People in this stage avoid responsibility by claiming incompetence or misunderstanding.

“I would but...”

2. BLAMING

People in this stage are aware that there is a problem but deny responsibility or shift blame.

“It's not my fault.”

1. DENIAL

People in this stage pretend that there is not a problem, or ignore it.

“I didn't know...”

Leadership at all Level

Be willing to learn from any team member - No one can know everything! But all together we can get really close!

Be open to learning from anyone on your team. When Macys was going under it was the employees that came up with the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade and saved the company...not to mention made a tradition that survived for generations.

Don't be afraid to listen to your employees when they have ideas, even if it's something you've always seen as a tried and true method they are questioning. They may find the hole you've been needing to patch!

WHAT IS COUNSELING?

Counseling is the escalated steps you take when the team member does not respond to coaching. While coaching is something that you do in the moment or right after the moment to give the employee the chance to adapt and move in a different direction, counseling is a more serious conversation.

Counseling generally occurs when an employee continuously misses opportunities, when an employee struggles with attendance or attitude towards the job, etc.

Counseling can often feel like the dreaded call to the principal's office, giving it a negative connotation, but doesn't have to be a negative experience. This is simply another way to help get your employee back on track.

As a more formal version of coaching, counseling usually consists of a written action plan that will let the employee see that you are aware of the situation, that you are documenting the conversation, and that you expect to see some sort of outcome from the planning session that the two of you are having. This is also something that for human resource purposes can be considered trackable.

What does this look like:

Observation	Counseling Goal	Expectations
Employee is continuously late to their shifts, even after being coached on the importance of arriving on time (Note instances of employee being late and coaching sessions had).	Determine if employee's tardiness is due to a schedule malfunction or a misunderstanding of the requirements of their position.	Employee must not be late for a shift for the next thirty days to show that they are making efforts to improve. Failure to comply can result in write up or termination.

This counseling opportunity highlights specific times when the situation at hand has been previously addressed with the employee, giving them ample time to correct the behavior. This more formal conversation allows the manager to document that an official conversation has been had and that changes to behavior and follow-up expectations are expected to be met. It also shows that there are repercussions in line if the employee fails to improve upon such behaviors.

Oftentimes counseling sessions are like miniature reviews documenting an employee's opportunities and the steps you expect them to make to improve upon those. Counseling sessions should include a scheduled follow up to discuss the performance changes (or lack thereof), and should include the employee's acknowledgement of the expectations and timeframes.

Sample Employee Counseling Form:

Depending on your state laws, you may be required to keep an official record of any counseling sessions, write-ups, or reviews that you administer. It's important to verify that you have all appropriate paperwork in order when it comes to employee training and development.

Below is a sample counseling form that can be used in case documentation is required or preferred.

EMPLOYEE COUNSELING FORM TEMPLATE:

Team Member Name: _____

Team Member Role: _____

Date of Counseling: _____

Supervisor's Name: _____

Date of Incident: _____

REASON FOR COUNSELING

Circle One:

Tardiness/Absence

Behavior/Teamwork

Inappropriate Conduct/Dress

Poor Performance

Safety Violation

Violation of Company Policy

Other: _____

ACTION TAKEN

Circle One:

Verbal Warning

Written Warning

Suspension

Probationary Period

Termination

Other: _____

DESCRIPTION OF INCIDENT(S)

SUMMARY OF CORRECTIVE ACTION(S) TO BE TAKEN

Signature of Employee: _____

Signature of Supervisor Administering Counseling: _____

Creating an Action Plan

Once you've had the conversation with your team member about the behaviors that you have seen and the corrective actions you would like to see them take to turn their progress around, it is important to give them a clear action plan.

This can be as simple as writing on our Counseling Form the details of the expected actions and the timeframe they should be completed within. Or, for more serious problems, you can create a full action plan for your employees to follow to help them along the way.

Remember to make sure that goals are clear for both the employee and the supervisor's role in the actions to be taken.

It is also helpful to ask the employee to explain back what the expectations are so that you can ensure that they fully understand what is required of them. This will make sure that there is no confusion in any follow ups on where an employee should be at the time of future conversations.

Below is a Sample Employee Action Form:

EMPLOYEE ACTION FORM TEMPLATE:

Team Member Name: _____ **Team Member Role:** _____

Date of Counseling: _____

Supervisor's Name: _____ **Date of Expected Improvement:** _____

AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

EXPLAIN IN DETAIL THE AREAS/ACTIONS EMPLOYEE NEEDS TO IMPROVE ON:

SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

DEFINE WHAT SUCCESS WOULD LOOK LIKE:

INITIATIVES FOR IMPROVEMENT

DEFINE WHAT ACTIONS/BEHAVIORS EMPLOYEE AND MANAGER WILL TAKE TO HELP REACH THAT SUCCESS:

PROGRESS/RESULTS

TRACK EMPLOYEES PROGRESS AND COMPLETION BASED ON EXPECTED DATES:

Signature of Employee: _____

Signature of Supervisor Administering Counseling: _____

FOLLOWING UP

After you have held a coaching or counseling session, it's important to continue the conversation in the future. You want your employees to see that you aren't just showing up and barking orders, but are actively participating in their growth and development. You also want them to understand when a counseling session or warning is given out that you will be monitoring the behavior to see if they improve in the expected timeframes.

Some tips for following up, include:

- **Be timely and consistent:** If you tell your employee that you will follow up with them in a week, do so. As mentioned earlier, it takes time to develop a habit, it also takes accountability. Make sure that you provide that for your employees so that they can develop needed or preferred behaviors as expected. Being consistent shows that you are as committed to their success as you expect them to be.
- **Be transparent:** When addressing the progress you see from a team member, it is important that you are clearly and openly communicating what progress or challenges you are seeing in them. If you need to make an adjustment to the plan to help them stay on track, ensure that they fully understand what is being changed and what is expected of them. Feedback isn't supposed to be a trick, but a tool. Make sure they have the same access to the toolbox that you do.
- **Celebrate successes:** As they move through the process, take some time to point out when you see them demonstrate behaviors that reflect the changes you are seeking. This will motivate them by showing you see the good work they are doing.
- **Define final parameters:** If an employee has successfully changed the behavior or accomplished missed tasks, let them know that they have done so. Using counseling of behaviors as a fear tactic, discourages employees from feeling like they are valued or part of the team. Take the time to have a follow up session at the end of the period and let employees know that they have accomplished the goal and that you hope it continues moving forward.
- **Ask for feedback:** It's always important to end your sessions with follow up from your team as well. Is there something else you could be doing to support them? Is there a way to make sure this requirement is better communicated to future team members? Is there something missing in the training? Including your employees in the conversation for further improvement shows that you value leadership at all levels and want to see the team as a whole succeed.

PRACTICE & EXERCISE

Instructions: Read the following behavioral situations and answer the questions based on how you would provide feedback to the employee in the scenario. Your responses should demonstrate your ability to listen and understand the situation, present and reiterate expectations through either coaching or counseling, and follow-up with your employee.

Scenario 1

Description: An employee is assisting a customer looking for a certain book which you do not have in stock. You witness the following conversation, before the customer leaves the store empty handed.

Customer: “I heard James Gunn said that you should read All-Star Superman in preparation for the new movie, do you have that in stock? I really want to read it.”

Employee: “Oh, yeah, you and everyone else. We’re totally out of stock.”

This is the first time you have seen the employee demonstrate this kind of behavior.

Questions:

1. List two possible alternative behaviors you would like to see the employee demonstrate next time.
2. How would you coach the employee in the moment to exhibit those behaviors in the future?

Scenario 2

Description: You have an employee that is consistently late for work. When they arrive for their shift they almost always take ten minutes in the backroom before they hit the floor, making them even later, causing a disruption in scheduling for others.

This is the third time you have had a conversation with them about this behavior.

Questions:

1. What actions can you take beyond coaching them on the behavior?
2. How can you explain the behaviors you want to see and outline expectations for the future?

Scenario 3

Description: You have an employee who was on an action plan for the way they handled closing duties. In the past, they have continuously left stacks of go-backs on the counter for the morning person to put away and failed to take out the trash. Over the last few weeks, you have noticed they have become the best at making sure the store is clean and bright.

You aren't due to have your official follow up to their action plan for another two weeks.

Questions:

1. How can you show them that you notice their improved behavior?
2. What actions would you take to ensure that the behavior is maintained going forward?
3. What follow-up questions might you ask to find out what has made the cleaning process easier for them and how you can get the rest of the team to implement it?

Scenario 4

Description: An employee on your team has noticed that when you come in you seem to be stressed and grumpy. They ask you if they can provide you some feedback, at which point they inform you that it seems to them that you have been exhibiting the behavior on the sales floor towards employees and customers alike.

You have just received feedback from an associate about your behavior that you feel strongly about.

Questions:

1. How do you approach the fact that your employee is providing you with feedback?
2. What actions can you take to demonstrate that you value their opinion?
3. What are ways that you can take action on your own behaviors to showcase that your team that you understand you are also a member of the team that needs to be held accountable?
4. How do you follow up for the future?

CONCLUSION

Feedback is an extremely valuable tool for all team members to give and receive. It is important that as managers/owners, we are prepared to coach our teams in the moment to ensure everyone is getting an equal and tailored chance to develop. It is also important to ensure that when we evaluate behaviors that we are focusing on specific moments, actions, and skills with a positive, growth-centric mindset at the base of all we do.



NOTE:

Remember it is impossible to hold someone accountable for something they did not know they were responsible for. If you want to ensure employees are meeting goals and desired behaviors, they must be clearly defined and explained in advance.

Expected behaviors and requirements should be outlined in Job Descriptions and Employee Handbooks. For more information on how to do that, see our guides on Creating Job Descriptions and Expectations and Employee Handbooks.