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### **IN PRACTICE**

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## **Testing the Feasibility of Coaching**

by Barry Zweibel

Coaching is showing up almost everywhere these days. It seems you pretty much can't pick up a newspaper or magazine anymore without seeing something about business coaching, or executive coaching, or management coaching, or life coaching. Even on the ASTD Website, a quick search on the keyword coaching brings up almost 900 listings. (Interestingly, keywords human resources only brought up about 700 ASTD-related links.) So what does all this chatter about coaching really mean? Or more specifically, why should training and development professionals even care about coaching?



Well, one reason is fairly simple: Chances are pretty good that your boss will be looking to you for an opinion as to whether "this coaching thing" can help your organization. And it's incumbent upon you for your opinion to be an informed one.

But there's more to it than that. It's also an opportunity to see how coaching could augment your existing training work - to help solidify the lessons you're teaching, and help sustain the learning you're enabling.

### **Sustaining the Learning**

How many times have you provided some absolutely fantastic training only to learn that the participants forgot it all within the first half hour of returning to the 20+ phone calls and 250+ emails waiting for them back at work? How many times has the stickiness of the status quo reclaimed their mindshare just days after your classes ended? How many times was a choice made in favor of cycling the next group through training rather than following-up with the group just trained?

In this context, coaching is an excellent augmentation to training:

- Coaching occurs over time - Weekly 30-to-45 minute sessions continue for 3-to-6 months after the training is completed.
- Coaching is done one-on-one - Its personalized, confidential, attention allows all those seemingly stupid questions to be asked without fear of public humiliation.
- Coaching facilitates continued learning - If a Developmental Moment happens but no one's there to reinforce the lesson, did it really happen? By virtue of its ongoing nature, coaching facilitates the "student mindset" and all the good that comes from that.
- Coaching leverages iterative learning - It's not easy to get it right the first time. And it's too easy to give up the first time you get it wrong. Coaching helps process the "what went wrong" and helps pull new insights and discoveries from it. It's also a great mechanism for celebrating those "private victories" a person might otherwise miss.
- Coaching enables alternate approaches to the learning - As training professionals you know that not all people learn the same way. Coaching's individualized approach can be customized to each participant to maximize its relevancy and impact.
- Coaching enables a better ROI from your training - The ROI of training comes from how your training is applied, not just from your delivery of it. But how the training is delivered makes a big difference in how it's ultimately used. Post-training coaching sessions could easily include follow-on assessments that could potentially identify a greater and more quantifiable ROI from your work.

If coaching provided you with only a few of these outcomes, it would still more than pay for itself.

## **Testing the Waters**

So how to proceed? Well, the most obvious way to bring coaching to your organization is to start a coaching initiative. (If you're an external trainer, you could start providing follow-up coaching as part of the training services you currently provide.)

But how can you tell if coaching is even appropriate for your organization? Not all training programs are suited for all audiences and neither is coaching. An approach used by many organizations is to conduct a pilot program, or a scaled-down version of the potentially bigger initiative. You still test the process - and determine its value. You just use a much smaller sample group and base the larger go/no-go decision on the consensus of the participants.

If your boss is just asking for information, though, a pilot program might be premature. And simply parroting back what the boss has already read won't really add much to the discussion, either. So imagine if you were able to speak from firsthand experience. "Well boss," you could then say, "I've been working with a coach myself - testing the waters as

it were - and here's what I know..." Talk about catching someone's attention! My guess is that with that kind of response, your boss would be very interested in what you had to say next.

So if you can't respond that way yet, maybe it's time to request some funding for a smaller feasibility study which could, obviously, include yourself. After all, the boss (and the boss' boss, too, no doubt) will soon be asking you for that informed opinion, remember?! And coaching could be just what your organization needs to solidify the learning and increase the value of the training you're providing. Besides with all the press about coaching, isn't it your professional responsibility to learn more about it firsthand?

But what if the boss asks you before you get your study underway? No problem. Simply say, "Excellent question! I've been thinking about exactly that and could see some real benefits in doing a small feasibility study. Can I get your approval for that?"

## **Selecting the Right Coach**

With your proposal accepted, you're now ready to proceed. But first, a few words of caution: Although many people call themselves coaches, not everyone can coach effectively. That's because coaching requires a mastery of advanced communication and relating skills, coupled with experience, knowledge and a special commitment to helping others grow. So when selecting the coach that you'll work with, be sure that the coach has:

- Relevant experience. Coaches are not consultants so they don't need to be subject matter experts in everything you're trying to achieve. But a coach with relevant experience will often be far more helpful than one without.
- Appropriate Credentials. Coaching is new enough that not all coaches are certified - and not all certifications mean the same thing. For personal life coaching, a good bet is to go with someone who has graduated from, and is certified by, an ICF-accredited coach training school. The Coaches' Training Institute, as example, offers a CPCC designation - Certified Professional Co-active Coach - which requires 115 hours of classroom learning, another 30+ hours of group teleclass learning, 12 advanced-topic learning labs, the supervision and critiquing of a series of client calls by three different coach trainers, 100 hours of paid coaching hours, a full-day written exam and two live coaching tests. For business coaching, a Registered Corporate Coach or Certified Executive Coach designation from the Worldwide Association of Business Coaches is noteworthy. The latter requires not just coach training for certification, but real-world business experience, as well. (See Relevant Experience.) Of course credentials don't guarantee success, but they do offer objective validation of the coach's skill and acumen.

- **Personal Rapport.** This is the third and final step of the selection process. At this point, you probably have a few coaches that you're considering as right for you. So now, you'll want to contact each one of them and ask for a free Sample Session. (Most coaches offer such a thing and it's something well worth doing, whether you move forward with them or not.) Here is where you'll see how good a 'fit' there is between you and your potential coach. Is this someone you'd like to work with? Is this someone you feel will help bring out your best? Rapport, coupled with relevant experience and bona fide coach training, creates an excellent platform for making your decision. Leave any one of the elements out and the stability of that platform may suffer.

## Summary

While the features and benefits of coaching are many, the best way to determine what coaching can do for you - and your organization - is to experience it directly. A Feasibility Study may be the key to gaining this firsthand knowledge. And using follow-on coaching as a way to augment your training could help more people realize the inherent value - and impact - of the work you've already been doing.

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Coaches Training Institute: [www.thecoaches.com](http://www.thecoaches.com)

Worldwide Association of Business Coaches:

[www.wabccoaches.com](http://www.wabccoaches.com)

Peer Resources has a lot of very good information including a compendium of Coaching News, Research, and Literature:

<http://www.peer.ca/coachingnews.html>

Another Peer Resources link for what they call "The Best Coaching Books, Tapes and Videos":

<http://www.peer.ca/topcoachbks.html>

Founded by the "grandfather of coaching," Thomas J. Leonard, <http://www.coachville.com/> is a great site for free coaching resources for both coaches and those interested in coaching

The International Coach Federation is the largest non-profit professional association of personal and business coaches. Some helpful links on the site include:

<http://www.coachfederation.org/aboutcoaching/about.htm> – an FAQ about coaching

<http://www.coachfederation.org/aboutcoaching/nature.htm> – the nature and scope of coaching

Author Barry Zweibel's Website

<http://www.ggci.com/NotCoaching/>, which helps define coaching by looking at what it coaching is not!