

# Building Leader Coaching Skills

By Molly O'Neill  
6/13/08

What is it about coaching that makes it an imperative mindset for today's leaders? What makes coaching so effective in the workplace? More than tools or skills, it's a way of being and communicating that supports the creative process of impactful change. Think of a change you've made because someone told you to and then think of a change you've made due to your own discovery, inner motivation and commitment. Which of these experiences engaged you as a whole person and summoned forth your best self?

Coaching comes with a cost, and not all leaders are willing to pay that cost. True coaching comes from an authentic place of trust – holding another person or a team responsible, but not hostage – supporting them to own their strengths and find their own solutions. So the work of the coach leader is to anchor into that inner space of authenticity-integrity-trust and invite people to join you there. That's where strong relationships are forged. That's where great ideas are born. That's where creativity flourishes. And that's where joy and fun are free to enliven the work environment!

So what is the mindset that leads to effective coaching? The fundamental premise is that people are whole, creative and resourceful. Those are natural human qualities, not reserved for an elite few. That being the case, what gets in the way? Systems, thoughts, assumptions, fear, habit, attitudes... But more than that, when there is a disconnect from internal values and purpose, people live in a chronic state of frustration, under-achievement and "getting by" dullness.

How can a leader make a difference through coaching? Adopt the mindset and ask some coaching questions. Coaching questions are open-ended (they can't be answered by 'yes' or 'no') and usually begin with the words "what" or "how." They invite self-discovery, new awareness and expanded choices about how to be and what to do. Their only agenda is to support the person or team's growth from where they are right now. They are NOT questions that lead to defense or justification or shame or guilt.

Another mark of a great leader coach is the personal culture of acknowledgment. Acknowledgment is the fertilizer for growing greatness – it says "I recognize and I value who you are" and it comes from a genuine honoring of a person's or team's strengths and good qualities. Acknowledging is much different than praise for a job, project or task well done. The flip side of praise is criticism. And how easily one can turn into the other! But acknowledgment looks to the person behind the task – and speaks to what it took to accomplish that task. Was there courage? Initiative? Perseverance? Leadership? When we see it and respect it in someone else, it grows within us; so acknowledging is a double-impact best practice!

And, of course, there is listening. A leader coach listens deep – and listens on the other side – where the other person or team is. It's the kind of listening that's free from agenda, so it's totally safe – where someone walks away knowing they've been heard and not judged. It's a rare thing and a precious thing. It opens the door to the place where breakthroughs can happen – small and large "ahas" that support the process of change, innovation, intuition and inspiration. It's about listening down into that creative space where possibilities can emerge and the momentum of commitment can ignite.

Is it worth the cost to lead through coaching? Is it worth the price not to?!!

© 2008 Molly O'Neill  
Reprinted with permission