

# Coaching at Work

*Coaching occurs in many different fields of endeavor. The skills and methods of coaches vary depending on the nature of the coaching relationship: the techniques used by an athletic instructor will be very different from those used by a “life coach.” The skills needed to improve employee performance on the job are similarly distinct. This article describes Ridge’s take on what’s required for effective workplace coaching.*

A prefacing note about our terminology: to avoid confusion about who is in what role, we will refer to the manager as the person doing the coaching and the employee as the person being coached. That said, the coaching skills described here can be applied in nonmanagerial relationships as well; coworkers, parents, and others can use these skills to aid the development of others.

## A Working Definition of Coaching

Ridge’s approach to the practice of coaching grows from our definition:

Coaching is individualized instruction that’s mutually desired.

There are three key points that inform the rest of this article:

- Coaching is individualized. Employees’ performance abilities differ. To get their best, your coaching skills need to address their unique strengths and needs.
- Performance-based coaching is instructional in nature. It’s a “how to” approach to development.
- Coaching must be mutually-desired to be effective. If it isn’t—if the employee isn’t invested in it—your coaching is less likely to take.

Performance-based coaching happens when an employee’s desire is present but know-how is not. If desire is absent, this is the first change that needs to occur. Once

it happens, he or she is ready—provided that the coach has the mindset and skill set needed to be an effective coach.

## The Coaching Mindset

The foundation of coaching is the development of a growth-oriented, positive mindset in the manager. An effective manager is “turned on” by the development of an employee’s excellence and views the coaching process as a noble endeavor.

Development-oriented guidance is not an isolated, one-time activity of the manager.

Ridge defines coaching as individualized instruction that’s mutually desired.

Rather, it is a process that pervades the entire managerial function.

Certainly coaching involves the skills that can be learned in many traditional management training programs, including those offered by Ridge. However, these face-to-face behaviors rest upon the foundation of a special coaching mentality. This all-important mindset motivates a manager to “grow” one’s people into self-motivated, effective performers.

This growth-oriented perspective, or coaching mindset, comprises three goals:

- building the attitude of a learner,
- recognizing strengths through positive feedback, and
- conveying high, positive expectations.

## Build the Attitude of a Learner

One of the most positive things managers can do in their coaching efforts is to foster the “attitude of a learner” in the people they manage.

The attitude of a learner is reflected in the following statements:

- I want to grow and develop.
- I can take risks.
- I am curious and persistent.
- I am a fallible human being.
- I make mistakes.
- If I live to be 90, I’ll continue to make mistakes.
- It’s a good thing about me—I can work, adapt, redo.
- Most importantly, I learn from each mistake and grow.

## Recognizing and Identifying Strengths and Potential

Peter Drucker, the well-known management consultant and author of many books and articles on management, said, “Find the employee’s strengths; that’s all you have to work with.” Unfortunately, very few people in our society are trained in spotting strengths or potential in people. Most of us are more acutely aware of what’s wrong with ourselves and

others. Managers who are good coaches replace this “red-pencil” mentality with a focus on the talents, ability, and skills that are inherent in the employee.

### Conveying High, Positive Expectations

Superior managers have the ability to create in their employees high-performance expectations that are then fulfilled. A combination that is key to the coaching mindset is the manager’s belief in his or her people’s capabilities plus an ability to convey this faith. In working with employees, the expectations communicated about their achievement can have a powerful effect upon the results they achieve. The diagrams that follow demonstrate this effect.

When a manager conveys limited expectations or negative messages, the following chain of events can take place for the employee:

He/She thinks I can’t, so . . .



When a manager conveys high, positive expectations, the impact on the employee is very different:

He/She thinks I can, so . . .



Positive expectations are not to be confused with unrealistic ones. In order to convey high expectations effectively, the manager needs to tie them to a specific strength or previous achievement. Be realistic about obstacles but also be realistic about the employee’s strength, potential, and ability to overcome them. Acknowledge obstacles; encourage overcoming them.

Oftentimes, managers’ coaching objectives are relatively narrow; i.e., they focus on someone improving at the immediate task at hand. Managers with the coaching mindset hope to achieve broader goals with their employees. They want people to develop their potential, learn to be team-workers, take greater responsibility, become problem solvers, and take the initiative to develop themselves. As coaches, managers have the opportunity, on both a short-term and a long-term basis, to determine how far their people will go in achieving these goals.

### The Ridge Coaching Model

Adopting a coaching mindset, building the attitude of a learner, and conveying high expectations are all essential in creating the mutuality required by coaching. But development also requires instruction. To be effective in this arena of coaching, Ridge’s model is as follows:

- **Observe/Target**
  - **Feedback**
  - **Instruction**
  - **Follow-up**

Let’s look more closely at each step of this model.

#### Step One: Observe/Target

During the **observe/target** step, the manager focuses in on—targets—the areas of development that will leverage the greatest growth.

#### Observing

A manager observes his or her employee to see which areas of performance offer an opportunity to coach. The most reliable source of information about the person is direct observation by the manager. Many managers state that they have minimal time to observe their employees directly. This often causes a dilemma for managers. The challenge for most managers, then, is to be able to increase their observation opportunities.

Ridge identifies the following types of observations that are available to a manager:

**Repeated Observation:** Manager frequently sees or hears employee doing a task.

**Once or Intermittent Observation:** Manager infrequently sees or hears employee doing a task or the task is done infrequently.

**Simulation:** Manager asks employee to show what he or she would do in a certain situation.

**Third-Party Report:** Other people tell manager of their observations of employee.

**Self-Report:** Employee initiates discussion of development with manager.

**Goal Discussion:** Manager speaks with employee about goals or areas in which he or she would like to develop.

### Targeting

Before we begin focusing on how to coach, let's look at where a manager might find development areas. Managers' responsibilities to their employees include increasing employee development in specific areas. Below are some categories along with an example of what a development area might look like for each category.

**Leadership Skills:** Tries to do too much him or herself. Lacks confidence and skills to delegate.

**Self-Awareness:** Seems not to recognize the impact his or her actions and words have on others.

**Assertiveness:** Hasn't learned to say "no" when appropriate.

**Role Expansion:** Is hesitant to take on new responsibilities.

**Problem Solving:** Could develop the skills of problem definition.

**Interpersonal Skills:** Would be a more effective leader if he or she learned how to listen.

**Team Work:** Could be a better team player by communicating his or her thoughts more openly at meetings.

**Presentation Skills:** Could be a more impactful presenter if he or she concluded persuasively.

**Mannerisms/Grooming:** Isn't as valued as his or her excellent work warrants because of he or she doesn't dress professionally.

**Priorities of Work:** Completes work, but is always stressed and working late to meet deadlines.

Once a manager has observed his or her employee over time, that manager has a whole gamut of information about the person's developmental areas. Rather than coaching on each individual action, the manager should focus on the actions that, when changed, will cause the most improvement in the person's performance. Targeting requires solid knowledge of the subject matter. When a manager knows how to do a task, he or she will also know which key piece of knowledge or skill the employee is missing. When a manager targets just that piece of knowledge or skill, he or she is focusing on creating the most development.

While targeting, the manager needs to keep in mind the employee's ability and style. A manager targets developmental areas that the employee is capable of changing and is motivated to improve if given the knowledge or skill. A manager also respects the basic style of the employee. Knowing that different people approach tasks differently, the manager tries to understand the employee's frame of reference. While targeting, a manager raises three questions:

- What single behavioral change would leverage the greatest performance improvement?
- What behavior would probably be easiest to change?
- What behavioral change might the person be most motivated to work on?

The answer to this last question is usually received from or confirmed by the employee.

### Reinforcement

Much of the observation and targeting described above, and much of the feedback section that follows, refer to coaching as a manager trying to correct behaviors. It's also critical that managers make sure employees don't change the things they are doing right. In addition to corrective feedback, a manager must strive for an equal mix of reinforcing feedback so that employees know when they are doing something right. When observing, a manager should be sure to look for strengths and be sure to target these behaviors for reinforcing feedback.

### Step Two: Feedback

Feedback can be a very effective instrument for bringing about change. However, inappropriate or poorly given feedback can cause more harm than good. Ineffective feedback can disempower people. By following Ridge's process for giving feedback, a manager increases the probability that the feedback will be accepted and acted upon.

Step two involves giving feedback on the behavior or behaviors that are observed and targeted as described previously. However, an accurate description of behavior is just one part of the content for coaching feedback.

When coaching, feedback content includes

- a statement of the standard,
- the description of the behavior, and
- the impact that behavior may have.

The standard describes the desired perfor-

mance. Standards can come from a variety of places such as employee manuals, industry best practices, or training material. Standards can even come from a manager's own conclusions based on experience. The important part is to establish the desired performance before continuing with the feedback.

The behavioral description is an objective description of the specific behavior seen in the "observe" part of the first step. Description of the behavior should be limited to actions that can be seen or heard.

The impact describes the result of the behavior. This can be either an actual or potential impact.

Here's an example of a corrective feedback message.

**Standard:** "At our last review, you agreed to work on your delegation skills to improve your impact as a team leader."

**Behavior:** "In looking at the latest project plan for your team, I see you're responsible for all but one of the major deliverables."

**Impact:** "Because of this you're limiting the number of developmental opportunities for your team and delaying your own career progress by doing the work yourself rather than effectively leading others."

Here's an example of a reinforcing feedback message.

**Standard:** "One of our meeting norms is to let the speaker finish his or her thought before adding your point of view."

**Behavior:** "In this morning's meeting, you let Chris finish describing her idea, even though you looked anxious to add some thoughts of your own."

**Impact:** "As a result, not only did Chris get to explain her idea completely, but she was more receptive to hearing the points you had to make."

### Self-Feedback

Before actually giving feedback, a manager can help develop receptivity on the part of the employee by inviting self-feedback from the employee. Here's how it's done.

**1) Ask for the person's own perceptions of his or her performance.** When beginning a feedback discussion, a manager asks, "What is your reaction to what you did or to where you are in relation to this area?" This allows the person the opportunity to critique him or herself. Often it's easier for a person to hear further discussion on a point if he or she raised it. In addition, this helps the manager gauge how the person might react to the feedback.

**2) Reflect the reaction.** This keeps the focus on the employee and assures that the manager understands that person's point of view.

**3) Check receptivity.** Because coaching requires mutuality, the manager asks if his or her ideas are wanted. If the employee says "no," the manager has a choice to make. If the feedback is critical to performance, he or she can leave the coaching role and assert the performance issue that needs attention. In these cases, however, it's important that the manager make the distinction clear. If the manager doesn't make it clear that they have stepped out of the coaching role, it can alter the dynamics of the coaching relationship and "poison the pool" for future coaching discussions.

### Giving Feedback:

When the coaching spirit is present, the employee will say "yes" when asked if feedback is desired. When the manager gets the green light, we recommend the

following guidelines for delivering feedback:

- Feedback should be given in bite-sized pieces. Giving too much feedback too soon can cause the other person to shut down. A manager must take one targeted behavior at a time using the format described earlier of standard, behavior, impact, and then stop.
- Ask reaction. The person will have a reaction to feedback. The manager must allow time for him or her to express this reaction.
- Reflect the reaction. This keeps the focus on the person being coached gives reassurance that he or she has been understood.
- Repeat. The manager gives another piece of feedback and moves through the process again, repeating until all of the feedback has been given. Feedback should be balanced—three or four reinforcing statements to one corrective.

### Step Three: Instruction

After giving feedback, a manager may decide to instruct the employee, assuming there's a gap in the employee's knowledge or skill. To instruct effectively, Ridge recommends selecting from the three options outlined below:

#### Tell How

The manager states what the employee could do to become more effective in this area.

#### Show How

The manager shows how to do the new behavior. When working on a difficult developmental area, a demonstration greatly increases the odds for effective learning.

**Practice, with Feedback**

The manager has the employee try out the new skills or behaviors, accompanied by immediate feedback. This way the person being coached can readjust while still in learning mode rather than repeating the wrong thing.

**Step Four: Follow-Up**

Having gone through the first three steps of the coaching model with an employee, a manager wants to ensure that the employee has the best chance to progress in that developmental area. The final step of the model, follow-up, is so crucial that it is not an exaggeration to say: if you don't have time to do a thorough follow-up with the person, don't coach the person.

Here are some ideas on what a manager can do to follow-up on coaching.

- Ask what the employee will focus on to implement the changes he or she wants to make.
- Offer to observe and give feedback on the progress.
- Schedule opportunities for observations and feedback.

**Conclusion**

Ridge has found this method of employee coaching to be one of the most effective ways to improve performance among employees. It accelerates development, helps people learn from their mistakes, and, by example can help employees to better develop each other.

If you'd like to learn more about how Ridge can develop coaching skills among the managers at your company, visit our Web site at [www.ridge.com](http://www.ridge.com).