Leaders as Coaches

By Drew Locher

Part of the multiyear corporate management development program in which I participated at the General Electric Corporation was a module titled, *Facilitative Leadership*. The premise of the course was that ultimately there are really three roles in organizations. 'Business Leaders' who set the direction for the organization, both long term (many years) and intermediate term (1 – 3 years). This was accomplished through a strategic planning and deployment process. 'Process Owners', those performing the various processes necessary to conduct business, would be responsible for the ongoing management and continuous improvement of those processes. In between, where one would expect to find middle management, would be 'Facilitative Leaders'. The role of the Facilitative Leader would be to put in place processes where they were missing, and process management systems for use by the Process Owners. In addition, the Facilitative Leader would ensure that the means are in place for Process Owners to be successful. This included ensuring that the Process Owners possessed the knowledge and skills required, and methodologies and tools to practice continuous improvement. It was an organizational model that resonated with me then and continues to do so ~35 years later.

Coaching: What's Required?

The idea of leaders as facilitators or coaches has gained much interest in the past 10 years as organizations in all industries seek to engage their team members beyond traditional norms. The continued high level of interest in the *Lean Leadership* and *Coaching for Improvement* programs which I instruct at the University of Michigan is evidence of this. Engaging team members' heads and hearts, and not just their hands can provide important benefits to any organization, and better ensure its long-term success. This requires a different mode of thinking and a different set of skills on the part of leaders at all levels. The development of others is the core principle in all coaching. The success of a coach in business, as in athletics, is dependent on the success of the team. While this may seem obvious, it runs counter to traditional 'command and control' leadership

styles. Further, a successful coach must exhibit humility which is <u>not</u> a commonly found trait in most leaders. Humility in the form of not having all the answers, but rather permitting team members to discover them on their own is essential if they are to fully develop the requisite skills and mindsets. Patience is yet another necessary characteristic that is not commonly found in most leaders. Coaches must demonstrate patience with their 'learners' as they develop the skills through deliberate practice following one or several prescribed methodologies. I often find myself needing to remind a leader to recall how much time it took him or her to learn, and how many opportunities to practice before he or she demonstrated proficiency and became comfortable with a methodology. They often find the necessary patience in the response to my question. The results of effective coaching go beyond achieving business outcomes. A strong bond forms between coach and learner. Reflect on your own life. Do you remember a teacher, an athletics coach, or a boss with whom you felt a strong connection? Now recall the nature of that relationship. Did that teacher, coach or boss have your best interest at heart, and help you to develop as a person? My guess is he or she did. Such bonds are important to achieve the desired engagement between an organization and its members.

The 'Game'

So, what 'game' are we playing? What knowledge and skills must a coach help a learner to develop? In the game of business there are two general categories of activities: running the business and improving the business. The distinction of these two categories become blurred as organizations engage their associates more and more in the latter. Further, particular skills are important to both types. Take 'system thinking' as an example. System thinking is an understanding of the interrelationships between processes and steps in a process, and the needs of internal and external suppliers and customers. Managers tend to have a broader perspective of how an organization works, and therefore have developed some level of system thinking over time. They need to develop such thinking in their team members. Associates can go about performing their various processes in more effective and efficient ways when they have a better understanding of the 'bigger picture'. This understanding is also necessary when considering process changes for the purpose of improvement. How often have you seen well intended changes in one area have a negative impact on another? This is often attributable to a lack of system thinking.

Of course, all team members must be capable in the work they are expected to perform to 'run the business.' Leaders often delegate the important task of teaching how to perform various business processes to other experienced team members. While this may sound like a wise approach, it can give rise to numerous problems.

Who says that the more experienced person will teach the preferred standard way? Are they willing to teach others? Are they even a good teacher? Is the 'on-the-job' training environment conducive to effective learning? These are just a few of the potential problems. Leaders must be directly involved in such instruction, or at the very least closely monitor it.
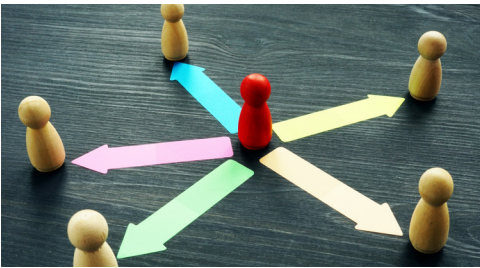
'Improving the business' activities require team members to develop the requisite skills and mindsets for continuous improvement. This requires proficiency in methodology - some form of 'Plan-Do-Check-Act' or 'PDCA', upon which all improvement approaches are based. It also requires capability in the various quality 'tools' used for process improvement and problem solving. These include data collection, charting and analysis, root cause analysis, mistake proofing, action plans, control plans, and other tools. Leaders must once again be directly involved in the instruction of these concepts.

The two categories of activities really converge within the management system. The system set up to manage a process or processes on a daily or near daily basis should have at its core continuous improvement. Leaders must first develop the system, with the involvement of team members of course. They must demonstrate its proper use, and the decisions and actions that the system should trigger. The decisions and actions can be short term in nature to quickly return the process to the desired level of performance. They can also be longer term. Repetitive process issues represent opportunities for improvement that may take some time to affect. The leader can then develop the required process management skills within the team over time, leaving more time for the leader to focus on development and improvement.

Two Forms of Coaching

There are two forms of coaching and instruction available to the leader. Which is used will depend on the skill he or she wishes to develop in others. They are both based on proven techniques such as: repetitive practice (practice makes perfect, or at least capability), deliberate practice (following a standard methodology), pacing (to the learner's ability to absorb more). For more 'motor' skills the preferred technique is embodied by 'Job Instruction'. (JI). The technique was formalized during World War II to shorten the typical learning curves of key skills to support the war effort. It has proven to reduce said learning curves by as much as 75%. The instructor demonstrates proper practice several times, providing a little more information each time. The learner then must demonstrate proficiency several times and explain the steps and reasons behind them. Sounds simple enough, but it takes skill to practice JI. 'Motor' skills include those required to use the aforementioned quality tools, running team meetings that are typically part of the management system, and the like.

Cognitive skills, skills used to reason and think, are best developed using the Socratic method. The Socratic method uses questions rather than physical demonstration. Process improvement and problem solving require cognitive skills, as well as 'motor' skills. Interpretation of data that has been collected, doing root cause analysis, and hypothesizing the effect of proposed process changes, just to name a few, all require cognitive abilities. The leader must not give the learner the answer, because the thinking stops, and little or no learning occurs. Even well intended suggested answers can lead to a transfer of ownership of the problem solving or improvement effort from the learner to the coach. Again, sounds simple enough, but it can be very difficult for many leaders to practice some form of the Socratic method. It requires humility and patience.

Summary

It all starts with belief. Do you believe that leaders developing others in the way described can provide important benefits to your associates and the organization? If so, then you will be willing to commit the time and energy required. Make no mistake about it, it will take a substantial investment of both. But before you become overwhelmed by the undertaking, consider starting small. We always recommend a 'narrow and deep' approach to any change effort. So, don't try to coach everyone from the outset. Such approaches have proven to be ineffective for any skill development. A skilled leader can only effectively coach 3-5 learners concurrently.

Further, if this is a new approach for the leader, there is much learning that he or she must first go through. I often say, "you need to be a learner *before* you can be a coach". Can't coach a 'game' that you have never played. I often have paired up leaders who must first develop their own skills before coaching others. They can practice amongst themselves before the 'game' really starts. This provides a good foundation for those early coaches to build upon. By taking this sensible approach, common pitfalls can be avoided. Momentum will be gained over time as more and more capable coaches become available to the organization. That said, there is no better time to start than now.
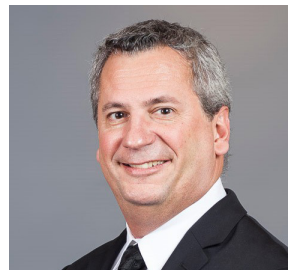
For more information on these University of Michigan courses mentioned in this article:

Lean Leadership:
https://nexus.engin.umich.edu/professional-programs/lean-leadership/index.htm

Coaching for Improvement:
https://nexus.engin.umich.edu/professional-programs/coaching-for-improvement* ∎

Drew Locher is managing director of Change Management Associates and can be reached at drewlocher@comcast.net