Coaching, The Missing Ingredient in High Performance
By Tony Graffeo, Ph.D

In the previous STILE Point #18, we listed the universal attributes of coaching in building the trust of team members. Building trust requires integrity, behavior that is honest and consistent in words and actions; empathy, a genuine concern for the feelings and aspirations of others; and teaching skills, the desire to learn the talents and motivations of others and stimulate their self-learning.

Despite elegant strategies and rigid management processes, the performance of most organizations fails to meet expectations. Why is this so? From my own experience as an R&D Managing Director, I found the performance of the organizations that I managed dramatically improved when I stopped trying to "manage" direct reports and spent my time coaching them to improve their performance and manage their professional development. I have also seen in my consulting practice a direct relationship between effective coaching and organizational performance by supervisors at all levels. I have come to the conclusion that coaching is the missing ingredient in achieving high performance. If this is true, why isn't it more widely practiced? I'll give you my point of view below.

Most all organizations recognize the importance of supervising staff and have sophisticated annual performance planning and development programs in place. "Management by objectives (MBO)" has been proven to be one of the more powerful tools in management theory over the past 30-40 years when successfully practiced. Unfortunately, poor execution of the MBO process has many questioning its effectiveness. Most managers and staff oftentimes dread the annual performance review. However, when properly executed, the performance planning and review process is a highly effective way to balance the need for performance (what can you do for the organization?) with the need for personal accomplishment and growth (what can the organization do for you?).

The following list represents some of the more important reasons why the MBO process is not as effective as it could be. How much does this sound like your organization?

- The majority of the planning effort is spent on filling out forms rather than having meaningful dialog.
- The main focus is tops down on organizational objectives with little input from staff
- The selected performance goals are rarely SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely)
- Staff aspirations and development goals are given lip service
- Performance goals are rarely reviewed more than once or twice a year
- Development goals are superficial oftentimes involving taking a training course
- Staff receive little support from management during the year in removing barriers to achieving their goals

In Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's excellent book <u>Good Business –Leadership, Flow and the Making of Meaning</u> , he lists the most important factors in determining high performance and staff satisfaction. These are clear goals, instant feedback, a match between difficulty and ability, and a sense of control. In order to meet these factors, good coaches do their homework. Matching the difficulty of assignments with the ability of staff requires you to spend time getting to know the strengths, weakness, aspirations and motivations of staff. The best coaches understand that an important part of their leadership responsibilities is placing their staff in positions to succeed, challenging them with meaningful assignments and supporting their development and growth. In a new relationship, the better one understands the aspirations of their staff, the more successful they will be in guiding staff assignments and development.

Coaching for Development

In coaching for development, the focus is on how the organization can meet the needs and aspirations of the employee. In most performance planning processes, staff development is an afterthought and rarely given much attention. I believe that this is one of the main reasons why organizations fail to reach their goals. In my opinion, the first priority in performance planning should not be determining performance objectives, but on the development process. High performance is achieved when staff is self-motivated and give 110% to achieving organizational goals. As stated above, staff are motivated by tailored performance goals that match and challenge their skills, control over the critical success factors, and instant feedback on their progress. It is nearly impossible to develop tailored performance goals unless sufficient time is spent getting to know the strengths, weakness, aspirations and motivations of staff. This can only be accomplished by starting with the needs and aspirations of the staff member.

Prior to discussing what an individual's performance goals should be (see coaching for performance below), begin by discussing staff development goals first. Before you even look at a form, have several conversations with staff to get to know them personally; their strengths, weaknesses, likes, dislikes, ambitions and constraints. Ask their advice on where they believe they can make the greatest contribution to the organization. Identify their career goals and realistically evaluate the probability of achieving those goals and the level of effort and timeframe required. Discuss both on the job assignments and extra curricular activities that would support and advance their career objectives. This information will be invaluable when trying to align the organizational goals with individual staff expectations.

A big mistake often made in performance plans is to assume that one size fits all. Many managers justify this position by assuming the only fair process is to treat everyone equally. This is highly counterproductive. By getting to know staff really well, you can coach them toward specific assignments that emphasize their strengths and minimize their weaknesses. Think of the coaching role as similar to a talent agent in the entertainment industry. Great talent agents know their clients' strengths and recommend only those roles where they know their clients can perform well.

Presented below are a few illustrative examples.

Allow staff to try branching out into new areas with some level of security. As an example, one of my high performing senior scientists was interested in a group leader management position but wasn't sure whether this was right career path for him. We both agreed to give it a try and for him to assume the role and responsibility of the group leader position. This trial assignment was communicated broadly with the understanding that he had his choice to continue in the group leader role or return to the staff scientist/project manager role. At the end the year, having performed the group leader role admirably, he decided that he enjoyed technical project work much more and seamlessly moved back into a project leader role with no loss of face.

Exploit exceptional strengths for the benefit of both the organization and individual. As another example, one of my senior staff had a brilliant mind and extraordinary skill in experimental design, scientific interpretation of research and lucid report writing. However his organizational and financial management skills prevented him from advancing in the organization where managing projects was a promotional requirement. We developed a performance plan for him focused on the role of principle investigator on multiple organizational projects, a role in which he excelled and the projects benefited. By pairing him up with younger project managers, they had the opportunity to learn and be mentored in sound science. In time, he rose to the highest level on the technical ladder, research leader.

Have the courage to allow staff to change careers. Sometimes, staff performance deteriorates because staff feels stuck in a job that does not suit them despite their academic training and degree. They discover hidden talents after having worked in an organizational setting for a while and want to branch out and change careers. Instead of thinking that the development cost of a career change is too expensive for your organization, think of it as a good investment in an individual who has discovered not only his or her talent but also the motivation to excel. From personal experience, this can be an excellent return on investment. One example is a financial manager/contracting officer with an MBA who was stalled in his current position. He excelled at negotiations and building client relationships and preferred dealing with clients rather than back office work. I offered him a trial assignment for one year in marketing and business development in which he excelled. He went on to have many successful and enjoyable years in that role.

In another example, a very organized scientist with a high level of emotional intelligence, social skills, and maturity applied for a position in human resources despite having no background or education in that profession. We took a chance and gave her the assignment based on her talent as opposed to experience with a development goal of acquiring the necessary HR skills through training. She went on to be an outstanding HR professional and eventually became HR manager of the organization.

These examples are meant to illustrate the importance of investing in people; getting to know the talent and motivation of your staff and putting them in assignments where they can succeed.

Coaching for Performance

In performance coaching, the focus is on how the individual staff member can contribute to the goals of the organization. Based on my experience in evaluating the

performance planning process in a dozen science and technology organizations in the US, Latin America, Europe and the Middle East; the process goes something like this. The supervising manager establishes several performance goals for his/her staff based on the goals passed down to him/her in company forms fit for that purpose. These performance plans are sent to the staff member who is asked to review the performance objective, list a few personal development objectives and then sign up for the year.

On average, the amount of face time that the supervisors spend with each reporting staff member is about 30-60 minutes. In the best case, the staff member agrees with the performance goals. In many cases however, there is some disagreement or ambiguity with the stated goals and the staff member is reluctantly forced to sign the performance plan anyway. There is little dialog at this time to resolve these disagreements leading to reluctant compliance on the part of the staff member. Not a situation that results in 110% commitment.

Once the plans a finished, they are often "put on the shelf" and not looked at until the end of the year. In some cases, there is a cursory review mid-year. I call this absentee management. When the time comes for the annual end of the year review, the manager has little information on the performance of the staff member versus plan and little concern for the adjustments that needed to be made during the year as a result of changes in priorities. With ambiguous goals and lack of feedback, it's no wonder that some staff dreads performance reviews. One of my consulting colleagues and an expert in HR jokingly remarked once that with absentee managers, staff would have a hard time picking them out of a police lineup!

In the other extreme, micro-managers not only tell staff what to do, but also how to do it (usually their way). They are constantly and frequently checking up on progress and are quick with their criticisms. This constant negative feedback and loss of control make for a highly negative work environment and low retention rates. Most talented staff don't leave organizations, they leave their immediate supervisors.

There is a better way!

Imagine entering a performance-planning meeting with staff having already spent considerable time on their development plan. You are armed with information on particular strengths of the staff member and what truly motivates them in their job. You both have a clear understanding of the staff members' career aspirations and the steps necessary to achieve them. You also know the staff members' weaknesses and job functions they dislike that may impede their performance. If you have invested the time to get to really know the staff member and have already agreed on a development plan, you enter the performance planning process with an increased level of trust, so essential for a good coach.

Prior to meeting with a staff member during the performance planning process, provide as much information as possible ahead of time on the performance expectations of the organization for the upcoming year, your performance goals, and what you expect to delegate to the staff member. Along with the materials, ask the staff member to recommend areas where he/she can make a contribution to meeting organizational goals above and beyond the obvious in his/her job description. Suggest areas yourself based on your knowledge of the staff's strengths and unique talents.

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With this level of preparation, the performance-planning meeting can be highly productive. You both enter the meeting with all the information needed to balance the needs of the organization with the aspirations of the staff member. You can then focus on a meaningful dialog by asking the following questions of the staff member. Where do you think you can make the greatest contribution to the organization? What assignments really excite you? What activities do you consider a chore? What are the barriers you foresee during execution? What support would you like to see from me? By discussing performance in the context of the staff members' personal preferences, you are now coaching instead of managing. This process will lead to an optimum performance plan that meets both the needs of the organization and the staff member.

Once the plan is generated, this becomes the roadmap for the year for both of you. As discussed above, staff satisfaction comes from clear goals; instant feedback; challenging but realistic assignments matched to the talent level; and personal control over the work assignments. Instead of waiting until the middle or end of the year, plan regular meetings once a month to review progress on the plan. During these meetings, congratulate the staff member on those assignments that are going well; for those assignments that are not going well, ask for reasons why and what he/she plans on doing about it; and most important, always ask if there is anything you can do to help. By meeting regularly and asking such questions, instead of being resented as an absentee manager or a micro manager, you will be appreciated and trusted as a performance coach. At year-end, instead of dreading the performance evaluation, you can write up a thorough report with no surprises. Better still, the staff member can easily draft a performance report for your signature.

If what I am proposing is the secret to high performance staff, why isn't it more widely practiced? First and foremost, it boils down to one's limited awareness of sustainable leadership and what it takes to succeed. Some managers, although they wouldn't admit it publically, consider staff as just paid resources to be exploited for their own benefit. Indeed in the short run, one can be successful by managing "upward" with an excellent strategy and well-managed execution with little regard to staff. Success the long run however is sustained by coaching "downward" with an increased awareness that success are achieved through talented staff that are motivated and aligned with organization goals.

Even with this increased awareness, the biggest objection I hear to implementing the above approach is that there just isn't enough time in the day to spend on coaching staff. Nothing could be further from the truth. Let's take one example. You manage a technical group with ten direct reports. If you committed to spending two hours/month of your valuable time focused on performance and development coaching for each staff member (one hour/month of quality face-time and one hour/month for preparation and follow-up), this would represent 20 hours/month or a little over 12% of your time. I suspect that you are spending more than that fighting fires each month, many of which could have been prevented with the above approach. Great coaches understand the importance of "working for" their staff to help them improve their individual and as a result, organizational performance.

Balancing organizational and staff needs – the true meaning of alignment

Unfortunately, even if you begin to practice development and performance coaching described above, there will always be difficult staff to deal with. One of the biggest mistakes that managers can make is not dealing with problem staff. One way to frame the discussion and help make decisions is to assume that most problems result from a mis-alignment between the aspirations of the staff member and the needs of the organization. Everyone has the talent and motivation to perform in areas of personal and professional interest. The problem lies in whether there is sufficient alignment of their interests with organizational goals. During the performance planning process, it is rare that personal interests align 100% with organizational goals and I believe that getting to at least 70% is essential to ensure a high level of performance. One of your challenges is to get to 70% alignment during the planning process.

A staff members' inability to perform can be do to either a lack of talent or motivation. I can think of three good examples I've experienced. In the first case, an individual you know to be talented underperforms due to a lack of self-confidence and fear of failure. This is a good example of where good coaching can dramatically improve performance. Try giving encouragement along with frequent positive feedback, and increasingly more challenging assignments with a safety net to avoid fear of failure. This will build self-confidence and dramatically improve both performance and staff satisfaction. If you are willing to invest the time, this is a highly rewarding experience.

In a second, more problematic example is an individual who has an inflated view of his/her talent and unrealistic expectations for career advancement. The challenge here is to spend the time during the development plan to point out the specific skills that would need to be developed in order to achieve his/her personal ambition. It is also important to temper the staff member's desire to take on assignments that you know they are not ready for. Once again a good coach is like a talent agent who chooses roles that are right for the person. I made the mistake once of telling a staff member that I didn't think they had the talent to achieve their career goal and lost that person's trust right from the start.

There will sometimes be the need, whether due to lack of talent and/or motivation, to recommend that an individual would be happier in a less challenging role or different organization. Putting off such a difficult conversation is bad for both the individual and the organization.

The greatest return on investment of your time is getting to know your staff; what they are good at and what motivates them. This investment will pay immediate dividends and take less and less time each year as you get to better know your staff. There is no greater path to high performance than coaching a talented and motivated staff.

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