

Creating a Coaching Culture at Work

Abstract:

- ⇒ What is a coaching culture?
- ⇒ Case history of Virgin Records
- ⇒ How to start creating a coaching culture

Creating a coaching culture is a subject which is increasingly talked about and aspired to in organizations today. In this article we look at the elements which make up such a culture and how to put them into practice.

I had the privilege of experiencing a coaching culture at first hand while working at board level with (the now Sir) Richard Branson in the early years of Virgin Records. This was back in the authoritarian years of the 1970s; we went to school and did as our teachers told us, then found a job and did as our bosses told us.

Joining Virgin was a pleasant culture shock, mostly because instead of being told what to do, everyone was doing exactly as they pleased. And what seemed to please them was to work harder than I had ever seen employees work before. It was only in retrospect, after later years spent working in corporations, that I was able to identify the values that made Virgin one of the most successful and fastest growing companies of its era. These were:

1. **Positive feedback.** Richard was constantly and sincerely telling his staff how great they were. Having started in business as a dyslexic seventeen year old magazine publisher who knew nothing about publishing, and progressed into a record company boss who knew nothing about music, he was genuinely impressed by the talent and knowledge he had assembled around him. Through his encouragement our confidence rocketed and, believing we could achieve anything, we found that we could.
2. **Ownership.** As no-one told us what to do, we had to work out our own strategies and schemes to make our sections of the business a success. We did this very thoroughly knowing that
 - a) there was no safety net – Branson was not the kind of boss who would check what we were doing and point out the pitfalls
 - b) if we succeeded, all the credit would be ours but equally so if we failed. Having put exceptional effort into devising our schemes, and been assured by Branson that we were capable of making them work, we strived above and beyond the call of duty to succeed. What people create themselves engages their whole commitment.
3. **A learning culture.** There exists research which shows that the only way children learn language is through their mistakes. The same applies to the infant learning to walk and the novice learning to ski; both learn through falling over. At Virgin, we were encouraged to take risks and, when mistakes inevitably happened, they were treated as part of the learning process.

Compare this with conventional company cultures where staff go to any lengths to hide mistakes from the boss; you can end up with a situation where whole teams of people are putting all their time and energy into a concealing an error which would be simple to rectify if only it could be admitted to. Without a blame free culture an organization will stagnate.

Virgin was a unique situation and I would not suggest that anyone tries to change a company's culture all at once; Branson had the luxury of choosing all his people from the start and it was his own financial risk which was on the line.

There is no need to rush the process because the beauty of coaching is that it can start from small beginnings and spread like a happy virus. The reason for this is simply because it feels good; when people experience being or having a coach, they

want more because it makes everything better. There is no downside to coaching. So a change of culture can be started even if only one person in the company hires, or is trained as a coach.

For example, in an airline company in New Zealand, the sales in one section rocketed by 20% while the rest of the organization suffered a decline. When the manager concerned revealed he had been working privately with a coach for the past three months, coaching and coach training were rolled out for the whole group and, as the culture turned around, the profits did too.

To look at specifics, coaching improves the culture because the following changes are made:

- Managers start asking instead of telling. The rich vein of knowledge which lies in the experience of each worker is tapped into and teams are more committed to plans which they have helped to create.
- Employees listen to each other more attentively, which provides support and enables them to learn from each other's ideas.
- Staff are given more positive feedback which builds confidence and loyalty.

A coaching culture cannot be introduced overnight but, through coach training or coaching and the good role models thus engendered, the way people communicate with each other will change over time until a tipping point is reached when the organisation will metamorphose into a positive, supportive and energetic entity. From this point on, the culture will have a momentum of its own.

Recommended books:

Fish

Stephen Lundin

The One Minute Manager

Ken Blanchard

All About Performance Coaching

Carol Wilson

Nigel Risner

It's a Zoo Around Here

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