

what executives really want

By Michael Ascot

According to the former GE chief executive-turned coach, Jack Welch, the best executive is “an over-burdened, over-stretched executive, because he or she doesn’t have the time to meddle, to deal in trivia or to bother people.”

But one of the hardest things that newly minted executives find when they reach the top is an ability to “let go” and focus on the strategic business drivers that will help to carry the company forward. In fact, they need to forget about many of the technical aspects of their job that created their initial success.

Coaches can help to unlock the inner strengths of leadership team members and encourage those strengths to be developed. Self-awareness of executives varies. While many are aware of their weaknesses, most are only dimly aware of where their strengths lie.

It is often not until someone takes a close interest in helping these executives that their performance starts to improve. This is where the gentle art of coaching comes in. The first step for a leader to initiate coaching for his or her team is to earn their trust.

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David Pottruck, president and co-CEO of Charles Schwab, says that a leader “simply has to be able to see and acknowledge other points of view, value them, and communicate appreciation for them.”

He says the executive needs to focus not just on answering questions but rather on responding to people.

“The effective communicator knows the difference between the questions, ‘Did he hear you?’ and ‘Do you feel heard?’ One is a transaction, the other is a connection. It is connection that inspires people to do their best work.”

At Heidrick & Struggles, we believe coaching is more than just managing. When dealing with direct reports, coaching means going beyond the day-to-day aspects of management to meet not merely tangible goals, but to help people build their strengths and develop skills and thought processes that will make them future leaders.

A good manager can effectively manage a team of followers, a good coach listens to people’s needs and helps them grow. Management is about guiding, coaching is about inspiring. The goal should be to develop a team of leaders rather than followers.

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To ensure coaching happens, managers should set aside time in advance – for example, one hour every quarter – for coaching activities. For newer team members or those facing particularly challenging situations, such as a new role, project, or team, coaching sessions should be scheduled more frequently.

Coaching needs to go beyond scheduled sessions. Opportunities for coaching emerge in the daily rough and tumble of corporate life. Employees who are confused or frustrated, mired in indecision, or performing below standards can always benefit from a coaching intervention.

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The intervention needs to be planned. A leader must decide what key points they want to drive home, and must be aware of what motivates the individuals involved – money, recognition, or compliments. This enables the astute leader to frame the coaching discussion in a way that will appeal to the employee.

Tyranny Of Distance An Asian Issue

Another issue, particularly for managers in Southeast Asia, is the tyranny of distance. Managers can find they are responsible for managing and coaching people overseas, operating in a completely different context, and with a completely different cultural background. Coaching from a distance is challenging, but managers who travel a great deal need to block out time during trips for coaching. It takes extra effort, but it will pay off handsomely.

Toward the end of the discussion the leader needs to agree on the next steps an employee needs to take and get their commitment to action and a follow-up date. They also need to know they will receive your full support.

How do you kick off the questions to your team member? You need to be non-confrontative. If you hear yourself asking “Who, what, where or why?” you need to take a step back. These words often signal an accusation.

According to Good to Great co-author Jim Collins, the best leaders are superb at asking questions.

“Many have law degrees, and their legal background gives them a perspective on asking questions. Most people are uncomfortable about talking about themselves. Leaders need to listen carefully to the employee’s answers and offer your viewpoint only where it may be helpful.

If the problem is large and challenging, detailed feedback may be necessary. If a creative solution is called for, you may need to offer a suggestion about how the employee can approach the problem from a new direction.

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Done well, coaching offers a superb way to improve the performance of both individual employees and groups. For coaching to be successful, managers must first work to win the trust of their employees, time their coaching interventions carefully, ask the right questions, and most importantly, listen.

- Remember that coaching is guiding, not telling or doing.
- Before a coaching session, whether planned or not, make sure to determine the key objectives you would like the session to achieve.
- Ask the right questions – avoid questions that may put an employee on the defensive.
- Listen carefully to an employee's answers, and offer your viewpoint only where it will be helpful to move the employee forward.

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