



Employee Coaching: When To Step In

From F. John Reh, Your Guide to Management.

Knowing when to step in and when to hang back

A lot has been written about why managers should coach employees. A lot also has been written on how to coach employees. You can find many articles on the Pygmalion Effect and the Galatea Effect, which explain how employee coaching works. Very few articles help you know when to coach employees. That's what this article does.

Before Coaching Employees

Most of the time, a manager should **not** coach their employees. To understand that statement, it helps to know what employee coaching is and what employee coaching is not. Giving employees the knowledge and skills they need to perform their job tasks is not employee coaching; that is employee training. On the other hand, employee coaching **is** an on-going process of helping employee identify and overcome the hurdles that prevent them from excelling at their jobs.

Note that employee coaching involves **helping** employees identify solutions to their performance barriers. You are not coaching your employees when you **tell** them what to do.

When Not To Coach Employees

Before you can effectively coach employees you must know that they are properly trained and that they know what is expected of them. These are the times to NOT coach employees:

- Their training is not complete
When an employee has not been completely trained it is a waste of your time and theirs to try to coach them in those aspects of their job. If they have been properly trained in part of their job, you can coach them in that part, but not in the areas where they have not yet been trained. Do the training first. Then do the employee coaching.
- They do not know what is expected of them
It is pointless to coach employees who don't know what is expected of them and know how that is measured. Remember that employee coaching is designed to help them overcome performance barriers. If they don't know what performance is expected of them they won't know how to get there. Set clear objectives for your employees. Then do the employee coaching.
- When you are in a hurry
Employee coaching takes time. When you are in a hurry, you will not do a good job. You will not take the time to **help** them identify solutions, but will be more likely to just **tell** them what to do. Make time to do it right. Then do the employee coaching.

- When you are angry or upset
When you are upset, you won't exhibit the enthusiasm and friendliness you need to be effective as an employee coach. You may not be fair or equitable. You may give even subtle signals to the employee that could undermine the coaching you have been doing up to this point. Get your emotions in check. Then do the employee coaching.

When stepping in is better than hanging back

In the first part of this article we discussed what employee coaching is and what it is not. We listed times when a good manager would continue to monitor employee behavior, but would not step in and coach their employees. Other times, a good manager must step in and coach.

When To Coach Employees

We need to let people to make their own mistakes so they can learn from them. We can train them and advise them, which will help some of the time, but actual experience is often the best teacher. A good manager, therefore, will hang back and resist the impulse to jump in every time an employee encounters difficulty. A good manager will always monitor what their employees are doing, but will not intervene to coach their employees except in the following circumstances.

- Their current behavior poses a threat to themselves or someone else
When an employee is doing something that could cause harm to themselves or someone else, you have to step in. This is one instance where you can't let someone "learn from their mistakes". You need to provide coaching. Rather than tell them the solution, suggest a couple of alternatives and let the employee figure out which is best. Make sure they understand why the behavior they were planning is inappropriate.
- There are ethical or legal ramifications of their actions
You can't allow employees to do things that are illegal and you shouldn't allow them to do anything unethical. Whether their planned behavior is illegal/unethical because of intent or ignorance, you can't allow it. As with dangerous behaviors, provide alternatives, let them decide, and explain why the planned behavior was a poor choice.
- They are hurting their team membership
You need your employees to work together as a team. If one member of the team is doing something that will cause the others to exclude him or her from the team, you have to step in. If an employee always takes credit for the teams' work, you need to coach them. If an employee in a close area, like cubicles, always yells into the phone and disturbs those around him, you have to step in and help him find a different behavior.
- They are repeating failed behaviors
When employees have repeatedly tried to solve a problem, and their solution isn't going to work, you need to step in. Often we try something and it fails. We try it again to make sure we did it the way we meant to and it still fails. If they keep trying, they aren't learning and you need to coach them.

- The impact on the company financials is severe
Almost any mistake is going to cost the company money, either directly or in lost profits. You can't step in every time an employee might make a mistake just to save money. Consider it an investment in the employee's learning and development. However, if their planned action would have a significant negative effect on the company financially, you have to step in. You have a responsibility to the company to protect its fiscal assets that is as great as the responsibility to develop its human assets. Provide the employee with alternative behaviors, let them figure out the appropriate choice, and explain why you had to step in.

Managing this issue

Knowing when to let an employee make a mistake they can learn from and when you need to step in and coach them is a balancing act. You have to balance their opportunity to learn and grow against the harm they could do to themselves, their team, and the company. The more confident you are in your own abilities, the more you will be able to let your employees make their own choices. Remember, your role in coaching employees is to **help** them find the right behavior, not just **tell** them what to do.