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## **ARTICLE** **COACHING**

# Is Your Employee Coachable?

*by Muriel Maignan Wilkins*

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As a manager, you provide some level of coaching to all your direct reports, helping some attain higher levels of professional achievement, and helping others improve their performance to fulfill their current roles. But while every manager should have the capability to coach, you also need to have the ability to discern when coaching isn't working.

When your direct report isn't improving despite your best efforts, you need to consider whether that person is coachable. "Coachability" requires two things of your direct report:

1. She needs to demonstrate a **commitment** to her development. That means she will be more willing to accept feedback, more willing to try something new, and more willing to confess if she didn't do something right—because she sees that moment as a learning opportunity.
2. She needs to have **capacity** to get to the skill level you want her to reach. For example, you could want to be a professional basketball player, but no matter how hard you practice, you may not get into the NBA.

If your direct report doesn't seem to be improving, don't assume the worst. Skills don't often improve right away, so first check for #1, the willingness factor. Is she showing up for meetings? Coming prepared? Is she taking the lead and following up with you? Is she addressing action items you have defined together? Is she owning the feedback you are giving her—or does she act defensive? If she is, as the coaching process progresses, you can start to watch for improvement in capabilities and outcomes.

If she's not, she may not be in a place where coaching can help. Discuss this with her to let her know what you've observed, and to explore with her how committed she is to her development along this particular path.

It's also common for a coachee's motivation to begin to wane even after she begins the coaching process enthusiastically. She may start canceling your check-in meetings; she may not address all of the action items you've agreed on; you might keep discussing the same things over and over again. This is a key moment for you, the manager, to check in with her. "You seemed eager and committed when we began working on this skill," you can ask, "Now it's lagging—what's behind that?" This opens up the door for a great coaching conversation.

A manager I know was working with a direct report on building the skills he needed for a promotion. She became concerned that she wasn't seeing him improve, and that he wasn't even coming to see her or ask her questions, or report on his progress. Finally she sat him down and talked him through what he really needed to do. But above all, she said, "I know we've been at this for a while and I feel like you are getting discouraged—and it's diluting your commitment to the process. Is that how you are feeling?" It turned out that he had thought she was very busy and wouldn't want to hear from him. They were able to clear up the misunderstanding and he made it very clear how enthusiastic he was about the work he was doing. It wasn't all easy for him from there, but they were able to talk more openly about his progress.

If your direct report's enthusiasm is high but her capabilities still don't seem to be improving—she's not showing even incremental progress toward the goals you have set—that may be a sign that she is not coachable on this skill. Again, find out more before calling it quits. Talk to her about the fact that she is not meeting your expectations, and ask questions so that she can explain her own perspective on the situation. "The needle hasn't moved on these skills we've identified as important. Were the

expectations we set earlier too high or unrealistic? Or is it that you need to put in more effort? Is there a different way that you can learn this?”

If you’ve tried every way you can think of to move your direct report in a particular direction and it’s just not working, consider alternatives such as a third-party training, or having someone else on your team provide the coaching (if you’ve had a tumultuous history, for example, the lack of trust can make it hard to get into a coaching relationship).

Sometimes the issue that your employee is grappling with may even take psychological therapy or counseling, especially if it is a general behavior rather than a specific skill. One manager I know had a direct report who was starting to miss a lot of deadlines just around the time their company was moving offices. He began coaching her on her productivity but instinctively felt that there was something deeper going on. As things progressed with the move, it became clear that she was very protective of the enormous number of files and objects that she kept in her office and she became very emotional at the thought of having to part with them. After the move, he referred her to the employee assistance program to help her address what had been a difficult situation. It turned out that she was diagnosed with an obsessive-compulsive tendency to hoard. This was far beyond what he could or should deal with as a manager.

It can often be difficult to even begin to assess whether this kind of intervention is needed because you don’t want to place judgment on the person. If you feel comfortable you can ask, “Have you thought about getting assistance in other ways?” But how you talk with them about this depends on the person and your relationship. In any case you should confer with your HR department before bringing up any more sensitive forms of treatment.

If she still doesn’t make progress, you will need to make a decision about whether she is the right person for this particular task or responsibility. If the issue you are trying to coach toward is a specific capability rather than a behavior, but your direct report is just not picking up the skills fast enough, despite having the willingness, consider redirecting her energies to skills that she does have. Shift her role if you need to. As long as that willingness is there, you have someone whom you want to support.

Acknowledging when someone isn’t coachable and finding more appropriate next steps to help her develop—or to just letting her maintain her status quo—can save you a lot of time as a manager, and sometimes it’s just what your direct report needs.

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