

F O C U S   S E R I E S



# COACHING FOR WORLD CLASS CUSTOMER SUPPORT

Mia S. Melanson



Help  
Desk  
Institute®



# **COACHING FOR WORLD CLASS CUSTOMER SUPPORT**

**Mia S. Melanson**



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# About the Author

## **Mia S. Melanson**

Mia Melanson has extensive experience in support, service, and sales, both as a manager and consultant. Her firm, Performance Consulting, of Natick, Massachusetts, works with professionals in high customer contact positions where performance directly affects profit. For the past twelve years, she has developed and delivered training in customer service, telephone sales, coaching, and management skills within entrepreneurial organizations and Fortune 500 companies. As a coach, she has helped hundreds of people reach high levels of performance.

Before founding her company, she was a sales support manager at Prime Computer, Inc., responsible for both strategic and tactical aspects of marketing campaigns and sales support programs. These initiatives generated measurable revenue for the company and earned her an excellence award.

Mia is a well-known speaker and writer on customer support, coaching, motivation, and stress management. She is a member of the Help Desk Institute faculty, and an adjunct faculty member at Northeastern University's School of Business.

# Chapter 1

## *Coaching is a relationship*

Many of us will never forget the 1996 Summer Olympics. After vaulting the American women's gymnastics team to a gold medal, despite an injured ankle, Kerri Strug was carried out of the arena by her coach. This event dramatically illustrated the role of a coach as both a respected expert and supportive friend.

While coaching help desk professionals is not an Olympic event, it is still a world-class endeavor. Like sports training, coaching produces incremental improvements that can add up to big changes. Good coaching can improve professionalism and morale, and many support organizations now use coaching as their primary method of ensuring quality customer care.

### **The elements of coaching**

In *A Passion for Excellence*, Tom Peters defines coaching as “the process of enabling others to act; of building on their strengths.” A coach collaborates with players (individuals or teams), teaching and encouraging them to achieve performance objectives and exceed prior levels of performance.

#### ***Cooperation***

In the paragraph above, notice the key words such as *enable*, *build*, *collaborate*, *teach*, and *encourage*. Unlike management, which is based on formal control and authority, coaching is based on a cooperative relationship between you and your team. Coaching cannot be successful unless a player or team is willing to improve and cooperate with the coach.

Jim Selman, an expert in management and coaching, has identified ten elements, listed in Figure 1.1, that form a foundation for a

successful coaching relationship with your team and with individual team members. The elements are interdependent; all ten must be present as part of the coaching process.

1. Partnership, mutuality, relationship
2. Commitment to producing a result and enacting a vision
3. Compassion, sense of humanity, non-judgmental acceptance, love
4. Communication: speaking and listening for action
5. Players' responsiveness to the coach's interpretation
6. Honoring the uniqueness of each player, relationship, and situation
7. Practice and preparation
8. Giving and receiving
9. Team sensitivity (consideration for all team members)
10. Willingness to go beyond what has already been achieved

*Figure 1.1 Ten elements necessary for a successful coaching relationship.*

### **Trust**

In a coaching relationship, both player and coach are open to learning and willing to admit mistakes. Team members rely on the coach to point out their errors in a spirit of positive improvement. And the coach, through observation and questioning, can help players go beyond prior limitations.

### **Respect**

Improvement relies on mutual respect and commitment from both performer and coach. The most successful coaches know their team members well; this insight enables them to share information, experience, and encouragement in a way that a player can easily embrace and transform into higher performance. Furthermore, successful coaches have earned credibility by “walking the talk.” Regardless of whether coaches have more technical expertise than their team members, they are role models for the level of performance and professionalism they expect of others.

**Patience**

Patience is the glue that holds all the elements together. You need patience to carefully and accurately assess your team member’s ability and commitment level in order to choose the most effective coaching approach for that person.

**Coaching to fit the player**

Your coaching approach should vary depending on the expertise of each player. For example, good support analysts adjust their communication style to match their customers’. A good coach knows the abilities of each team member and has at least a “gut feel” for their levels of commitment and skill. Before you begin coaching, use this knowledge to choose an approach to fit each individual. Figure 1.2 describes four coaching approaches that are appropriate for different employee skill levels.

<b>Novice</b> <i>Most guidance from coach</i>		<b>Expert</b> <i>Least guidance from coach</i>	
<b>DIRECTIVE</b>	<b>TEACHING</b>	<b>SUPPORTIVE</b>	<b>EMPOWERING</b>
<p><b>The coach should:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Set clear objectives</li> <li>• Give specific instructions</li> <li>• Offer support and encouragement</li> <li>• Check progress often</li> </ul>	<p><b>The coach should:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer examples based on experience</li> <li>• Teach additional skills where needed</li> <li>• Answer player’s questions</li> <li>• Set goals and milestones</li> </ul>	<p><b>The coach should:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Motivate, support and encourage</li> <li>• Ask questions that lead the player to consider alternatives</li> <li>• Set goals and milestones in collaboration with player</li> </ul>	<p><b>The coach should:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Delegate independent authority for a task</li> <li>• Provide necessary resources</li> <li>• Seek action plan, clear goals, and milestones from player</li> <li>• Check progress at longer intervals</li> </ul>

**Figure 1.2** *The style of your coaching should depend on the skill and experience of the performer.*

The *directive approach* is appropriate for a novice. For example, when coaching a new hire, you will initiate most of the communication. It is unrealistic to expect a new hire to offer alternative goals or methods. Spell out your expectations, recommend specific ways to meet those expectations, and direct the execution of tasks.

On the other extreme, your most seasoned employees respond best to an *empowering approach* in which you delegate both a task and the authority to accomplish it. Since these employees have both the commitment and ability to reach a performance goal, coaching discussions will be dominated more by the employee's communication than by yours. You need only to express how independently you want the employee to work, provide resources, and schedule check-in points to ensure progress.

Two last approaches fall between these extremes. When a team member is willing to improve but does not know how, use a *teaching approach* to share your experience and fit offer additional skill instruction. When a team member is capable of the expected performance, but lacks confidence or experience working independently, use a *supportive approach* to strengthen motivation and discipline.

### **Players welcome coaching**

Your employees want to be coached. In a survey I conducted among 200 customer support professionals, I asked the respondents to list factors that they believe contribute to extraordinary performance. The number-one factor was: “supportive management, including guidance, direction, mentoring, coaching, buy-in, and backing.” Support employees want coaching that creates a productive workplace and actively contributes to their professional development.

For example, a support center recently added on-going coaching to team leaders' duties. At first, the team leaders were concerned about their ability to coach, and doubted that analysts would welcome this extra attention. On the contrary, the coaching sessions have been so successful that when a team leader must miss a coaching session, the team member usually asks to reschedule it.

**Learning with your players**

John Cleese, former *Monty Python* actor and now consultant, believes that the purpose of coaching is to launch an employee on a journey of self-discovery. All coaches—whether new or experienced—share that journey.

This book is a map of the coaching process. As we walk through each step, remember that each coaching journey will be different for both the player and you. That endless variety makes coaching exciting and rewarding.

# Chapter 2

## *The coach prepares*

Sports trainers decide what skills to coach by viewing game films, analyzing statistics, and reviewing notes on a player's progress. As a good support coach, you will also need to do your homework before working with your players.

### **Assessing the player**

As I discussed in Chapter 1, you must assess the abilities and commitment level of your players before coaching. The best way to do this is to observe them in action. You can also analyze customer satisfaction surveys and call statistics. In addition, ask your players what they would like to accomplish with their own professional development or what aspects of customer service they would like to improve.

### **Evaluating yourself**

You must also ask yourself some questions to mentally prepare for the coaching discussion. These questions will help you define what you want to say and how you want to say it. Answer very honestly. In thinking through your responses, you may realize that what you thought was a player's problem may in fact be your organization's or your own.

***Can I specifically state the concern or goal?*** If you can't clearly state the problem, you won't be able to find a solution. Be sure you know the reason for any improvements you propose.

***Has the employee been fully trained? Are performance expectations clear?*** Employees need basic training and clear performance standards before coaching can be effective. If expectations change, the employee may need some refresher

training. Ferdinand Fournies, a renowned author on coaching in the workplace, found that most employees who performed below standard simply didn't know what was expected of them or how to do their jobs well. These employees indicated that if they were clearly shown how to best perform their tasks, they would do so.

***Have I provided the necessary resources?*** The availability of necessary tools is an important factor in performance. For example, if you expect people to deliver quality solutions in a multi-platform environment, you must give them the opportunity to get familiar with all the hardware and software they will support. You must schedule time off the phones for individuals to become comfortable with new tools before you measure performance in that particular area.

***Have I given conflicting objectives?*** For example, people cannot resolve the maximum number of calls possible *and* write complete problem/resolution descriptions in the problem management system. Concentrating on either objective will lower performance on the other.

***Do I have a plan?*** Whenever possible, think through various methods to achieve the results you want. A player's solution may make your ideas unnecessary, but you should have your own proposal ready in case the player is short of ideas.

However, a coach isn't expected to have all the answers. If you can't think of a solution, then clearly communicate the problem and ask the player to take responsibility for finding a solution.

***Do we really care enough to commit to improving performance? Or is this just the latest management fad that will eventually fade away?*** Coaching can only succeed when the organization cares enough about professional improvement to dedicate time to it. If you have answered these questions, and still feel that a player's performance can improve, then you're ready to begin the eight-step coaching process.

# Chapter 3

## *An eight-step coaching process*

If you've never coached before, this eight-step process will guide you through new territory. If you're already coaching, use this process to refine your own technique. Apply this process in a way that is comfortable to you, while considering the needs and learning style of the person you're coaching. The more you coach, the easier it becomes.

### **Step 1: Create a trusting, caring, learning environment where everyone is at ease.**

Before you can coach your employees, they must trust you. In a recent survey, employees described how managers can earn that trust. Figure 3.1 lists the top five trustworthy behaviors.

#### **Managers and supervisors earn trust when they:**

- Communicate openly and honestly with me without distorting any information.
- Show confidence in my abilities by treating me as a skilled, competent associate.
- Listen to and value what I have to say, even though he or she may not agree.
- Keep promises.
- Cooperate and look for ways that we can help each other.

*Figure 3.1 Top five trust-building behaviors among managers and supervisors, based on a survey of Trust in the Workplace conducted by Development Dimensions International Center for Applied Behavioral Research.*

Most help desk supervisors take a hands-on approach, by spending time on the floor to field questions, by handling difficult customers,

or by simply answering the phones during busy times. These behaviors build trust by demonstrating that you respect your people as skilled, competent associates, and that you honestly want to help. Coaches don't just say that they care. They continually demonstrate that caring and serve as examples of the level of individual performance and teamwork they expect.

### **Step 2: Define and communicate the reason for the coaching discussion.**

There are typically five reasons to initiate a coaching session with an individual or team:

- Improvement of technical or customer service skills.
- Professional development to achieve personal goals and the organization's expectations as stated in job descriptions.
- Recognition and encouragement of positive contributions, actions, and behaviors.
- Cooperative development of methods to achieve team service goals, or execution of business procedures.
- Training of newly-hired personnel.

If a player's performance needs improvement, tell the player about the behavior you've observed. State its effect on the customer, on you, on the employee, and on the team. If you are coaching to polish an already good performance, or encourage an individual to learn an additional skill, then make that objective clear.

When coaching an individual, keep the discussion focused on the individual. It is inappropriate to discuss anyone else's performance, though it is perfectly within the rules to discuss team goals and what they mean to an individual contributor.

I'm reminded of a saying attributed to the humorist, Will Rogers... "Speak with words that are soft and sweet. You never know when you'll have to eat them." Rehearse what you will say so listeners will remain open to your message and trust you to work with them fairly. The following example shows how to

define the reason for a coaching discussion in a positive, non-threatening way:

*“Dale, I’d like to sit down with you later today to talk about using a professional vocabulary. I had the opportunity to listen to some calls and heard some pretty colorful language. I’d like to work with you to improve conversations with customers. Will this afternoon work with your schedule?”*

**Step 3: Begin a dialogue on ways to improve or excel.  
Listen with empathy.**

We often think of listening as the passive role in communication. In fact, listening is a highly active function that requires you to seek out the true meaning in what is said—and also what isn’t said. In *“The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People,”* Stephen Covey states the fifth habit: *“Seek first to understand... then to be understood”* That’s what is meant by empathic listening: listening to fully understand the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of others. It’s listening with both your heart and your head.

He further states: *“Diagnose before you prescribe.”* In other words, listen without evaluating or judging, and avoid the urge to offer advice until you understand your player. Even if you have actually observed behavior that needs to be improved, verify your understanding to be sure you’re dealing with the root cause and not just the symptoms. Here’s an example:

A highly-skilled engineer often worked long hours on difficult assignments. He had a reputation for working well with people, but he had become impatient with clients. One day, in ear-shot of the call center, he shouted, “customers are idiots!”

The coach asked the engineer to speak privately. The coach repeated what he had heard and asked for some background about the remark. The engineer explained that he had just spent several frustrating weeks on-site with a client, and was tired of working with customers in general. Now, back with co-workers,

he was letting off some steam. He apologized. The coach listened to both the engineer's words and the feelings behind them, probed further, and found that the engineer was experiencing burnout. In fact, the discussion turned to convincing the engineer not to quit his job. They agreed that the engineer would take an overdue vacation immediately, brainstormed some better stress management techniques, and scheduled a follow-up meeting.

Had the coach simply reprimanded the engineer, a talented employee might have quit. Instead, the coach's careful questioning and listening uncovered the true problem.

**Step 4: Encourage participation by asking open-ended questions.**

By listening well, you will gain enough information to ask open-ended questions to increase your understanding. These questions encourage your player to come up with specific suggestions for a solution, and they show that you respect the player's ability to solve problems and assimilate new skills. Here are some examples of open-ended questions.

*“What can I do to help?”*

*“How are you looking at that?”*

*“What outcomes do you expect?”*

*“Why do you think this didn't work as well as you hoped?”*

*“What can we change to make this work better?”*

Notice that the questions include the words I, you, and we. These questions are the heart of coaching, a collaborative effort in which two people work together toward a common goal.

Open questions require a great deal of thought and explanation from your employee. Allow for at least five to ten seconds of silence (or more) to allow the respondent to think before speaking. Do not rush in to answer the question yourself, or the respondent will stop trying to answer.

Good questioning can help you identify the root cause of a behavior, and not just its symptoms. If necessary, use questions to verify your understanding point by point. As you become better at listening and asking questions, your employees will become better at analyzing situations, including their own actions.

### **Step 5: Use the player's suggestions whenever possible.**

Ben Franklin said, "Men are best convinced by reasons they themselves discover." By asking open-ended questions, you can help players discover for themselves how best to approach an issue or problem. And they are more likely to accept a solution that they have developed with you, rather than one you have imposed on them. Have your own solution or skill-building process ready; however, offer it last, and only if necessary.

Of course, there will be times, particularly with less-seasoned employees, when you must present an action plan as part of a very directive approach. For instance, you might direct a new hire to attend your company's orientation, immediately followed by two weeks of shadowing your best customer support representative. After the first week or two, arrange a meeting with your new employee to answer any questions, schedule them for formal skills training, and set clear expectations regarding job performance. This meeting is a coaching session in disguise. Though you dictate clear job objectives, you also give the employee a chance to share initial experiences and expectations with you.

### **Step 6: Agree on a plan of action: who will do what by when.**

Like any productive meeting, a coaching session must produce a decision about future action—both yours and the player's. Since the responsibility for improvement usually lies with the player, your action plan should be shorter. In the plan, specifically state the outcomes you expect: behaviors, processes, and results.

**Step 7: Schedule a follow-up meeting within five to ten days.**

A follow-up meeting demonstrates that you mean business. It also allows for the further exploration of an action plan because your player may have thought of additional and important questions or suggestions as a result of your initial discussion and the actions that followed. This meeting provides an opportunity to fine-tune the plan and provide feedback on progress that has been made so far, if any.

The follow-up meeting is also the time to identify any additional resources that may be needed, reorganize the work load if necessary, ensure that the player is taking the agreed-upon actions, and schedule future coaching sessions.

**Putting the steps together: a coaching example**

Let's pause for a moment to see how these steps work together. This brief scenario illustrates Steps 2-4 of the coaching process (we'll assume Step 1 has been done). It also combines both the Teaching and Supportive approaches I discussed in Chapter 1.

*Coach: "Jo, you've expressed interest in becoming a team lead in the future. To that end, I have a project that I think you'll find interesting,"*

*Jo: "So far, I'm interested. Tell me more about it."*

*"We compile weekly statistics from the ACD. Now we need to start tracking that data on a monthly and quarterly basis so we can identify trends to manage our center more effectively, I'd like you to use the weekly data to develop a quarterly summary for managers. How does it sound so far!"*

*"Good. Although, I'd need to know exactly what the managers want to see and how detailed they want the information to be."*

*"We would define that together at first. Later, I would expect you to talk with them directly. I'll introduce you to anyone*

*you don't already know. We would sort through their initial input and produce a draft report together. Then you can refine it as you learn more about what's needed. And I'll review your work before we distribute it. You're good at identifying related problems and the impact of one on another. So I think you're a natural for this kind of analysis."*

*"Thank you. It sounds like I could learn a lot and it's different from other things I've done before. (Pause) How often would you need the report?"*

If you're listening well, and noticing Jo's non-verbal cues, you detect Jo's concern.

*"At first once a month, then perhaps just quarterly. What are your concerns?"*

*"I'd really like to do it, but I think it could be time-consuming and I'm plenty busy right now."*

*"Of course. In the beginning new projects often are time consuming. Think about how you might need to change your schedule to accommodate this assignment. I'm open to reducing your time on the phones if necessary. I'd really like to see you take this on, and we need the first report next month. What do you need from me?"*

*"I don't know right now. You need to show me some of the recent weekly reports and how you produce them. And then I'll probably have some more questions."*

The coach began by clearly defining the reason for the coaching session in terms welcome to Jo (the possibility of becoming a team lead). After watching for signs of anxiety, and asking open questions ("What are your concerns?") to explore these further, the coach then knew to address Jo's workload problem. Finally, the coach's question, "What do you need from me?" shifted the responsibility to Jo.

Before they leave this session, Jo and the coach would work out an initial action plan (Step 6) and schedule their next session (Step 7). In that session, and those that follow, they will repeat the coaching cycle as they establish priorities, processes, and check points. And throughout this process, the coach will guide and motivate Jo with a steady supply of feedback.

### **Step 8: Provide detailed, ongoing feedback.**

You may have noticed that the discussions of Steps 5 through 7 were much shorter and simpler than Steps 1 through 4. This is because doing a good job on the first four steps will naturally simplify the later steps. Toward the end of the coaching discussion, the bulk of the input should come from your player and not you. This “power shift” shows that you are enabling your players to contribute to the team effort through their own talents and abilities.

But the last step of the coaching process is reserved for you. As coach, you must provide the objective feedback that helps players improve or keeps them on the right track. The next chapter will focus on the importance of feedback, and show the right ways to provide it.

# Chapter 4

## *Giving feedback*

Coaching is a continuing cycle of observation, analysis, action, and evaluation. So far, we've discussed seven steps that move you and a player from observation through action. When you evaluate the results of the action and provide feedback to the player, you complete the coaching cycle.

Consistent team performance is critical to customer service excellence. The best way to ensure consistent performance is to communicate consistent expectations and provide feedback to all team members. Performance feedback can take the form of posted reports and graphs, or simple on-the-fly verbal communication. I recommend both. A steady stream of feedback keeps your players informed and motivated toward improved performance. In this chapter, we'll explore three forms of constructive feedback: recognition, positive reinforcement, and advice.

### **Recognition**

On-going recognition is critical to the success of your customer support operation and it is one of the most effective forms of feedback. In spite of this, many companies give insufficient recognition, or none at all. In the survey I mentioned in Chapter 1, 30% of the respondents said that recognition and appreciation were the two things that they needed most and received the least. In a business that deals with an endless supply of problems and complaints, it's small wonder that support professionals need large, regular doses of recognition to maintain high performance.

Recognition and appreciation can take many forms, and can be targeted to individuals or to whole teams. Here are only a few examples of recognition as a form of feedback:

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- Grant comp time, or dinner out, to offset extra hours of effort.
- Send team members to outside seminars or customer sites.
- Assign special projects, reducing time on customer calls.
- Establish a “Wall of Fame,” for certificates, thank-you messages, and other commendations.
- Relay good news about your staff to the rest of the company.

Imagination is the only limitation on your recognition ideas, but remember to ask your team members how they’d like to be recognized. Recognition is more effective if it comes in a form that a person values.

When you acknowledge your players’ efforts and celebrate their successes, you create an atmosphere in which you are welcome as both a teacher and a bearer of good news.

Recognition creates a motivating environment, and highly motivated professionals are a joy to coach.

### **Positive reinforcement**

Positive reinforcement rewards specific behaviors so that people will want to repeat them. In other words, catch your employees doing something right, and praise them. Be specific about the quality of their work and its good effect. A sincere thank-you note is a form of positive reinforcement, but a coach who overhears good service can simply walk over to the player and say:

*“I like the way you handled that call. The customer sounded anxious at first, but your friendly voice and patience helped him relax and work with you. You really showed empathy and professionalism with that customer. Great job!”*

When you consistently use positive reinforcement, your support center will exhibit increased confidence, increased motivation, and improved, consistent performance.

**Advice**

Advice is information intended to change behavior or improve performance. Giving advice can be as simple as teaching someone how to format a report. Or it may be as comprehensive as helping someone define a career path. Good timely advice, given with compassion (but not emotion), will improve your team's self confidence and performance. It will also strengthen your relationship with them.

Giving advice is appropriate when a team member requests it. It is also appropriate when you can specify a particular way of improving. However, don't charge in with advice until you know the facts of a situation and have advice worth offering. As I recommended in Chapter 2, ask questions first. Then listen to understand, not to criticize.

**Ineffective feedback: criticism and silence**

Criticism is usually poorly-worded, ill-timed advice; remove it from your feedback repertoire. Because it focuses on fault, criticism typically leads to defensiveness, not to problem-solving. Consider the following statement:

*"You did a poor job presenting at the meeting this morning."*

Of course, this will diminish your staff member's confidence, hurt your relationship, and generate excuses. Worst of all, it fails to offer any helpful information. A better approach is to ask questions about the person's preparation (or lack of it) for the poor presentation. Based on what you learn, the two of you can then formulate a plan to improve future presentations.

On the other extreme, some organizations seem to think that the lack of criticism—silence—will tell players that they're performing well. Unfortunately, no one is ever sure what silence means. Don't make your players guess about their performance. Be clear and specific with your feedback.

### **Seven tips for better feedback**

Feedback, like any other part of the coaching process, must be tailored to the individual player. The following tips will help you give your players the most productive feedback.

**Discuss poor performance in private.** People are never comfortable discussing their weaknesses. These discussions may also disclose confidential information about a player's home life or work relationships.

**Praise in public (usually).** Some people enjoy public recognition, but others are embarrassed by it. If you're unsure about the best way to praise good performance, simply ask.

**Give specific, timely feedback.** Offer feedback soon after a behavior occurs. Be specific when you describe the behavior that you do or don't like. And only give feedback about behavior that you observe; never work with second hand information.

**Choose a time when the listener is attentive.** Do not give feedback during distracting times, such as the end of the shift, or when someone is returning from vacation or sick leave.

**Ask for a response.** Be sure the player understands and accepts the feedback.

**Give feedback in small amounts.** Don't overload people with too much information. Don't expect big changes all at once. Like the overall coaching process, feedback yields incremental results.

**Request feedback from your staff.** Ask for feedback on your own performance. Receive this information gracefully and use it whenever possible. While an open exchange of suggestions and opinions is more challenging to manage, it will foster teamwork and mutual respect, and generate more effective ideas.

**When coaching doesn't work**

The bad news first: Coaching can't fix every problem. A capable coach can follow all the steps, give specific, constructive feedback, and still see no improvement in a player's performance.

When coaching doesn't work, it often means that a problem goes beyond coaching. The person may be unsuited for the job, or have problems that require counseling. In that case, recognize your limitations. Ask for help from your manager and your human resources department. Remember, you are a manager and coach, not a hero, career advisor, or psychiatrist.

Now, the good news: These cases are very rare. Your players will almost always respond to consistent, caring coaching. With that in mind, turn to Chapter 5 for some ideas to help you get started on this exciting journey.

# Chapter 5

## *Getting started as a coach*

World-class performance is the result of dedication and consistent improvement by both player and coach. All great coaches had to start gradually, and so do you.

### **Learning the first steps**

Coaching is a lot like dancing. There are a lot of possible moves, and you and your partners must learn to do them together. But, like a dance, coaching can be simplified to a few essential steps:

- Establish an environment of trust.
- Regularly ask your team members how they want to improve.
- Establish clear goals and expectations, and continually reinforce the behaviors that accomplish them.
- Continually enhance your skills and those of your team members.
- Coach at the level of each individual. Start with the fundamentals, and build from there.

Concentrate on these principles until you and your team are comfortable with the idea, the process, and the results of effective coaching. Initially you may just tell your team that you will be working with them one-on-one to improve service. Put on the headphones (at their workstations) and simply listen to them handle calls. Be ready to help if your team members ask for advice. As you gain skill and confidence, expand your coaching to follow the full eight-step process.

### **Reaping the first rewards**

Even simple coaching can produce real improvements in customer service and support center morale. But players and customers

aren't the only ones who gain. When you begin coaching, you and your organization can reasonably expect these benefits:

- You will have frequent opportunities to clarify goals and methods.
- Your management job will be easier when your team is highly skilled and motivated.
- You can delegate more often when you share leadership among your team members.
- Performance reviews will be easier, because you will already know first-hand how your team member is performing.
- You will create many opportunities for career counseling.
- You will establish a continuous feedback loop that helps you manage more effectively.
- It will be easier to identify the cause of sub-standard performance, such as a poor job fit or obstacles outside of the work environment, and you can handle those problems differently than skill-related ones.

### **Beginning the journey**

Coaching may be the most powerful tool available to accomplish your service objectives through your front-line representatives. However, the speed of its results will vary among players because coaching is an ongoing effort that typically leads to incremental improvements in professionalism, skills, and consistency. But steady, incremental improvement—like the single steps of a journey—can add up to big changes for you, your support professionals, and the customers you serve.

# Appendix

## *Where to learn more*

Refer to the following resources to learn more about coaching:

Zemke, Ron; Anderson, Kristin. *Coaching Knock Your Socks Off Service*. New York: AMACOM American Management Association. 1997. ISBN: 0-8144-7935-9

Nelson, Bob. *1001 Ways to Energize Employees*. New York: Workman Publishing. 1997. ISBN: 0-7611-0160-8

Covey, Stephen R. *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989. ISBN: 0-671-66398-4

Minor, Marianne. *Coaching and Counseling: A Practical Guide For Managers*. Menlo Park, CA: Crisp Publications, 1989. ISBN: 0-931961-68-8





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