

Think You're Coaching? Think Again.

Abstract: Coaching is finally getting the attention it deserves as an incredibly effective tool to drive performance, and that's a wonderful thing. Unfortunately, in practice, coaching is often confused for other conversations, namely feedback and difficult conversations, and leaders assume they are coaching effectively simply by holding one-on-one meetings with team members or by providing on-the-job training.

Coaching is a perennially hot leadership topic. Across industries, leaders understand the value coaching can bring to their teams. Effective coaching has the power to take good performance to great. And, great performance can boost morale, customer experience, productivity, innovation, and ultimately the bottom line. So, it's no surprise that organizations today see coaching as a key development and engagement strategy. Why then do we consistently hear that leaders aren't coaching their team members adequately? And what can we do about it?

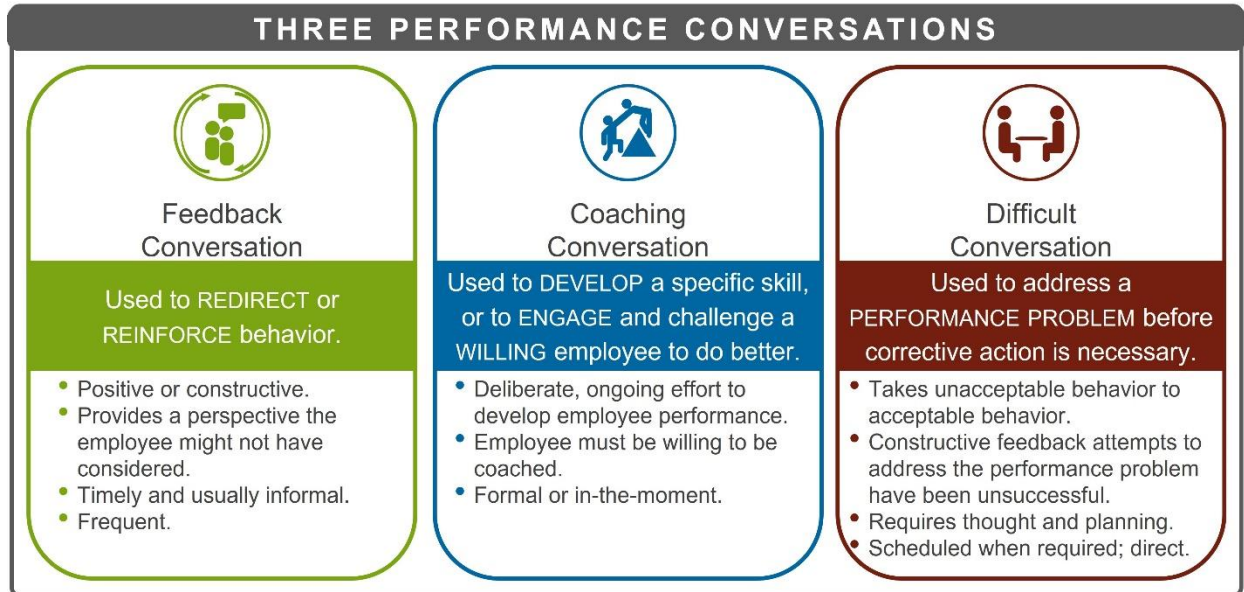
When we look at why leaders don't coach, or don't coach effectively, we typically encounter one of four roadblocks:

1. **Time**: Our leaders don't have (or say they don't have) the time it takes to prepare for, conduct, and follow-up to a coaching session.
2. **They think they're already coaching (part one)**: They mistake coaching for what we call a difficult conversation. "This is the second time Tyson has come in late; I guess I need to have a coaching session with Tyson."
3. **They think they're already coaching (part two)**: They think telling (what we call feedback) is coaching. (Spoiler alert: it's not.)
4. **They have too many people**: This is associated with the time response above; our leaders don't have time to coach everyone... so they coach no one.

In this article, we'll define coaching once and for all using handy models leaders can reference on the job.

The Three Performance Conversations

To level set, let's start by quickly defining each of the Three Performance Conversations: Feedback Conversations, Coaching Conversations, and Difficult Conversations. The model below outlines the target audience and primary objectives of each conversation:



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We find that simply showing people this model helps clear up Roadblocks #2 and #3. Coaching is NOT merely providing feedback. Coaching is NOT having a difficult conversation about a performance issue.

Okay, so what exactly is coaching?

Coaching Defined Once and for All

Coaching is the conversation that leaders use to engage and develop willing team members, specifically individuals who want to grow and develop. While that's not everyone, it is most of your team. Coaching is used to develop skills that are critical to the individual's current (or immediate next) position. Coaching helps people perform better at their current jobs.

Why should we spend time and energy on developing performance that is already acceptable or good?

Many leaders spend 80% of their "people time" dealing with performance problems, which are typically found in less than 20% of their team members. The poor performers in most organizations get most of the attention, with little or no attention devoted to developing one of the most overlooked, but critical, groups of individuals: your average to good performers. As a result, productive and high-potential team members are left underdeveloped AND unattended; these are the individuals who quietly leave your department or leave your company altogether.

Most “coaching” begins and ends with the annual performance appraisal. The leader shares their perception of the strengths and weaknesses of the individual. The individual publicly acknowledges (and typically privately disagrees with) the assessment. Both vigorously agree to a “development plan;” both breathe a sigh of relief when the meeting concludes; and both go back to their business-as-usual until next year. That’s not coaching.

While coaching doesn’t involve a lot of time (contrary to popular opinion), it does require commitment and follow-up. Sometimes follow-up is in the form of a quick hallway catchup meeting, where the coach might say to their customer service rep, for example, “I know that you have been working on controlling your nervousness on your calls. How has that been going?” Sometimes coaching is a more formal process where coach and coachee get together every two weeks to discuss the specific skill the individual is working on.

Entelechy’s Approach to Coaching

Now that we know what coaching is (and what it isn’t), how do we lead a coaching conversation? In our experience, the role of the coach is to ask questions to encourage the coachee to reflect on their performance and brainstorm ways to take that performance from good to great.

The fact is that most people, even when they ask for advice, are somewhat reticent to receive it. When offered suggestions, many people retreat to a defensive position and try to explain WHY they did what they did or what they might have done if circumstances allowed. This type of “coaching” frustrates both parties.

However, we know that most people, when asked, know how they performed on a given task, specifically what they did well and what they didn’t do so well. Our approach to coaching gives the employee an opportunity to share this insight with the coach before the coach shares it with the employee.

In fact, Entelechy’s Coaching Conversation model is unique in that it prescribes what the coach should say. Unlike most coaching “models” that only talk about stuff like “you need to be empathetic” and “you need to be open,” our model helps leaders by giving them the words to say and the questions to ask.

And, most importantly, it’s simple and easy to use. We know that if models aren’t prescriptive and simple, leaders don’t/won’t/can’t use them.

By asking questions, we’re able to determine what our team members need from us. If an individual didn’t know how to use the system, we could share some insights or suggest they shadow a colleague. If they didn’t pick up on the fact that some customers were getting frustrated by extra conversation at the end of the call, we could have offered tips to help gauge the mood of the caller. The only way to discover what the coachee knows or doesn’t know is by asking questions and listening.

Sounds easy enough, right?

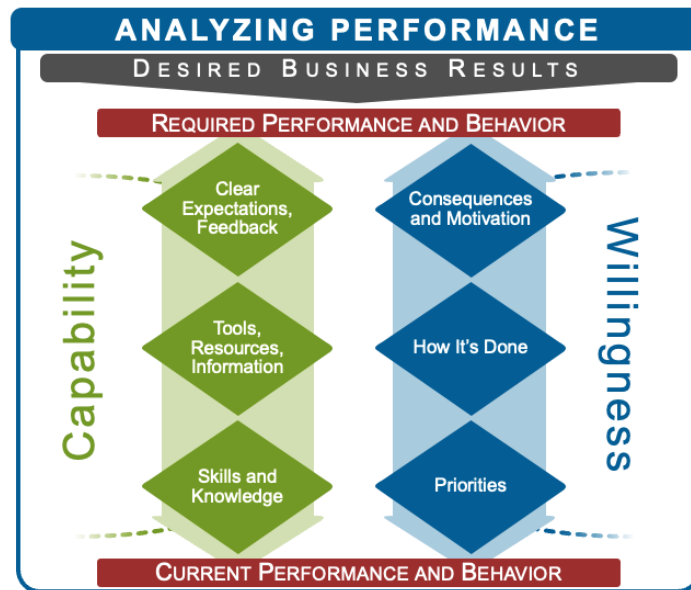
The key to success, however, is to help cultivate the skill of self-assessment in your team members.

Coaching and the Power of Self-Assessment

Our experience shows us that most people, when asked, know HOW they performed in a given task; they know what they did well and they know what they didn't do so well. Our approach to coaching gives the individual an opportunity to share this insight with the coach before the coach shares it with the individual.

That is important for three reasons. The first reason is that if YOU critique your own performance, both the good and not-so-good elements, you are much more likely to accept the feedback. The second reason is that we want to encourage self-assessment in our team members. The best team members are those who recognize the need for improvement and set about bettering themselves without constant monitoring. This only happens with individuals who self-assess, a characteristic we as leaders want to encourage. The third reason is that it gives us as coaches an opportunity to analyze why an individual may not be performing as expected and whether the coachee knows HOW to improve.

Let's take a look at Entelechy's Analyzing Performance Model to illustrate the two primary things people need to perform: they need the capability and they need the willingness.



There are basically two reasons why people don't perform as expected:

- 1) They **CAN'T** – They don't have the capability. Examples include:
 - They don't understand the original expectation or how they're doing.
 - They don't have the resources (tools, information, time, etc.).
 - They don't have the skill or knowledge.
- 2) They **WON'T** – They aren't willing. Examples include:
 - There are no consequences or motivators compelling them to perform in a certain way.
 - They think that their way of doing something is better than the specific way the task has been outlined.
 - They have differing priorities than yours.

Your role as the coach is to ask questions during the coaching conversation that helps the individual self-assess and analyze his/her performance. While this might feel a bit unnatural at first, over time it will become second nature. One benefit to always asking the same coaching questions is that coachees come to expect that you will ask these questions and come prepared to answer them. As a result, they've already coached themselves without the coach even asking. Isn't that what we all dream of — team members who continually evaluate their performance and strive to improve all the time?

Closing Thoughts

In this article, we covered what coaching is (and what it isn't). You learned that there's a time and a place for coaching (and it's more often than you think). Coaching is a performance tool to take good performance to great performance. Coaching can be used to develop a specific skill or to challenge an individual to take their performance to the next level. And, finally, coaching is meant for willing and able team members.

The ultimate role of a leader is to achieve business results through people. While there is a whole universe of skills and techniques that leaders can use to unleash performance, effective and direct performance support via coaching can turn you from a good leader to a great leader.

About Entelechy

Entelechy partners with leading global organizations to design and deliver leadership development programs that drive permanent change and bottom-line benefits. Entelechy's flagship leadership development programs, [**Aspiring Leaders**](#), [**Unleash Your Leadership Potential**](#), and [**Leading Leaders**](#), transform leaders as they progress through their careers. Entelechy is an authorized provider of proven, research-validated assessments, including Everything DiSC® and The Five Behaviors®. To learn more about Entelechy, please visit entelechyinc.com and follow us on [LinkedIn](#).