



Great expectations, the secret to coaching

When people become managers, they do not automatically assume the mantle of coach. Management is an assignment and coaching is a choice.

By Gregg Thompson

The late Boyd Clarke, co-author of *The Leader's Voice*, was a kind and generous man who treated everyone he encountered with dignity and respect. While he was a wonderful friend, however, conversations with him were often challenging. Boyd had the knack of looking past people's imperfections and shortcomings, and seeing only a wealth of natural talent and countless opportunities ahead. Boyd had great expectations of others. He was a coach.

Boyd was fond of saying, "Our job is simply to help others become the best version of themselves." Is this not the quest of all of those who seek to coach?

Those in managerial roles don't automatically assume the mantle of coach when they become managers. Management is an assignment; coaching is a choice.

When a person receives high quality, one-on-one coaching, there is often an increase in their performance. Sadly, there is a chronic undersupply of great coaches.

Three principles

Great coaching relationships are based upon the principles Boyd employed in his relationships: appreciation, confrontation, and accountability.





1. **Appreciation.** Notable thinkers in the arena of appreciative inquiry, such as David Cooperrider, have advanced the theory that organizations change in the direction of inquiry. In other words, rather than focusing on flaws and shortcomings, if managers seek out and identify the best traits of an organization, they will propagate more of these traits. An effective leader coach is skilled at recognizing and promoting the natural talents of others.
2. **Confrontation.** Boyd was a warm and gentle person, but not one to be taken lightly. In fact, it was quite painful to be in his presence. He would say anything if he thought it to be true. Boyd didn't just see the greatness in others; he confronted them with it. A conversation with Boyd could be quite unnerving. Why? Because, once a person's talents and potential were named, they were out there, and it was up to that person to deal with the information.
3. **Accountability.** Occasionally, some would find themselves avoiding Boyd. If they had committed to making some kind of change in their management, leadership, or performance and had not followed through, they would usually steer clear of him. Boyd was not the kind of person to let others slide by on anything but their very best. He would hold people accountable, not to his standards but to their own.

Coaching is becoming popular because it works. When a person receives high-quality, one-on-one coaching, there is often an increase in their performance. Sadly, there is a chronic undersupply of great coaches. Managers who are asked to coach their constituents are often woefully unprepared for this task. They possess all of the basic interpersonal and management skills needed for their supervisory role but find that these are insufficient to facilitate sustained performance improvement in those they lead. Often, they fall back on the comfortable rituals of giving advice and telling war stories — the

two practices most commonly confused with coaching. It is not because these managers lack the desire or the ability to become forces for positive change in the working lives of the talent, but in need of a better understanding of what great coaching is, and how they can practice it.

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Being a great coach is not like being part of a secret society whose doors are open only to external professionals. Coaching effectiveness is achievable by anyone who has the selfless desire, in the moment of the conversation, to direct all of their abilities and expertise into the service of the talent. Coaching effectiveness can be developed. To do so, leaders must move beyond basic supervisory skills and performance management processes into a different way of being. Coaching is not simply about doing more of the same, it is about becoming a person like Boyd, who refused to see others as anything other than their absolute best.

Thousands of managers were asked: "What are the qualities and behaviours of those individuals who have the greatest impact on your performance and career?" Responses include: "She saw something in me that I could not yet see in myself," "He challenged me to step up to a bigger game," "She held me accountable to a higher standard." These responses describe perfectly the coach-like leader who really makes a difference in the performance and careers of others.

Are you this kind of a leader? Are you a true leader coach? Do you insist on seeing the best in others? Do you challenge them to live up to their own high standards? Do you hold them accountable for outstanding performance every day of their working lives? And perhaps the thorniest question of all: If the people in your organization were asked to identify their greatest coach, would your name be on their lips? ■

Gregg Thompson (greggthompson@bluepointleadership.com) is the president of Bluepoint Leadership Development and the author of *Unleashed!*

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