

A Great Coach in Action

By David H. Maister

In Managing the Professional Service Firm (1993), I told the story of how I was coached by one of my mentors at Harvard Business School. I continue to use the story as part of my presentations, but I have never before written down in one place a comprehensive discussion of its lessons.

At the risk of repeating some points for those who have attended my seminars or read most of my previous work, I report here on the discussions that take place at my seminars when we explore the story and its lessons.

The Story

When I joined Harvard Business School as an assistant professor, I was not full of self-confidence. In fact, I was sure that I was a hiring mistake.

Rather than working at maximizing my performance, I focused on my immediate tasks (my teaching) and just tried to do my job, hoping no one would look too closely at my capabilities and performance.

For a while, this strategy worked. I was left alone. But after about six months, there was a knock at my office door. I opened it, and there stood one of my senior colleagues. "Hi, David," he said, "Have you got a minute for me?"

"Sure," I mumbled.

"It's such a pity that we don't have time to spend with each other," he said. "You have your responsibilities and I have mine and they keep us busy. But I was

just passing by and thought we could take a minute to catch up."

"Tell me," he said, "what's your research about?"

Since I wasn't doing any research (and we both knew that) I played for time.

"Well, I've been very busy and I'm not sure I'm really ready, and there are a number of things that interest me and..." On and on, I unfolded my excuses.

Eventually, as he remained silent, just listening, I said, "But, maybe...just maybe...and I don't want to make any promises...perhaps professional firms would be interesting to study."

He remained silent for a while and considered my answer. After what seemed an eternity, he spoke.

"You know, David, that's not a stupid choice! Now that you mention the topic, I can't think of anything major that has been done on that subject. There's a real opportunity to do something important.

"What's more, nothing in that idea conflicts with what we want to do as a school—I would tell you if it did. Well done! What a great idea!"

Then came the devastating follow-up question:

"And what subjects do you plan to research about these firms?"

I couldn't even pretend to have an answer. For perhaps the only time in my life, I was lost for words and remained silent.

I will never forget his next phrase until my dying day. He said, "I can see you haven't thought it through completely."

"But," he continued, "I know people at some of these firms, and I hear about a lot of the issues they have. Let me pass them on to you, right now, in case one or more of those issues interest you."

He proceeded to describe a range of managerial and strategic issues faced by such firms.

Most people I discuss this with agree that at this point in the conversation I had no choice except to select from among the topics he described and say something like, "Well, I imagine it could be worthwhile to explore some of those topics with those firms."

He went back into silent thought mode. Finally, he spoke again.

"David, the more you talk about your plans, the more excited I get. This is great stuff! I can see it now. You'll do important work, get famous and we will all be very proud of you."

"I'll tell you what I'll do, David. I'll have my secretary come by and give you a typed list of all the professional firm leaders I know. Feel free to contact them, and use my name. Tell them I suggested you call."

He then looked at his watch and said, "I'm really sorry, David, but my duties call me away. I hope I'll be able to come by soon and see how things are going. I don't know when that might be, but sometime soon, I hope."

And then he left.

Within ten minutes (*ten minutes!*) his secretary was at my door with a typed list of names, addresses and telephone numbers of professional firm leaders.

Again, I had the overwhelming feeling that I now had no choice. There was nothing I could do but call those people. They turned out to be interesting and helpful, and I was on my way!

What turned out to be the thrill ride of a career had truly, finally been launched.

And here's the point as I experienced it: if he had not shown up, I *know* that it would have taken me a long time to get organized and start investing in my career. I suffer from procrastination as much, if not more, than other people, and self-discipline has never been a strength of mine.

It turned out, however, that with skilled coaching I was capable of getting more done than I ever dreamed of, and could achieve a great deal more when coached well than I could when left to my own devices.

The Lessons

When I tell this story in my seminars, I turn to the participants and ask, "What was it about what he did and the way that he did it that made it so effective as a piece of coaching? How did he get this person (me) who was doing OK, but did not really have the car in gear, to get going and start being productive?"

(You may wish to pause reading here and write down what you think the key elements were.)

The answers people give are numerous, but almost always include the following:

The Existence of Real, Agreed-Upon Standards

Most people who hear this story observe correctly that there was no debate in our meeting about whether or not I *should be* doing some research. That had been determined long before, and was a precondition for his coaching to work.

His sole task was to help me stay true to a prior agreement.

The role of agreed-upon prior standards in effective coaching is often poorly understood in professional firms. Standards in many firms are *aspirations*, not *minimum behaviors*.

Without unambiguous, nonnegotiable standards, coaching cannot work. Can you imagine the conversation?

Coach: "I'm here to help you meet the standard."

Recipient: "I choose not to meet that standard at the moment."

Coach: "Oh! OK! But let me try and persuade you anyway."

The tragedy of many professional firms is that this is exactly what happens in coaching, particularly, for example, between and among "partners."

In a separate article I will discuss how a firm can achieve an unambiguous "prior agreement" on its standards. However, that is not the purpose of this article, so our discussion will continue as if your firm does indeed have such standards.

Enforcing Standards

Accepting that there *were* real standards at the Harvard Business School, when did my colleague begin to enforce them? Most people would say, "The moment he knocked on my door."

It was not only the conversation itself that sent the unavoidable message that the standards were real and enforced.

Perhaps even more powerful was the fact that, by his presence, he obviously (a) had been paying attention and (b) was able to respond in real time to my "departure from excellence."

The process of standards enforcement had already begun before he said a word. I remember the feeling to this day, and the familiar phrase that went through my mind: "Oh, boy! Around here, you can run, but you can't hide!"

Of course, it is a common failing among professional firms that those in managerial positions do *not* notice issues early and do *not* have the time to respond to them in short order. Poor coaching is often less a matter of not knowing what to do than it is of not having the time to do it (or perhaps placing other things ahead of it in priority).

It is important to stress that I was not (yet) "failing" or "struggling." My colleague didn't wait to respond until I was "in trouble." He intervened while there was still time to help and influence me.

Essential to his impact on me was the fact that he had (or had created) the time and inclination to discuss my weaknesses with me, one topic at a time, right when they first became evident.

As simple as this sounds, it is not that common or easy. Many of us in supervisory or managerial roles, perhaps even of a majority of us, have a preference for waiting until the problem is so bad that we *have* to deal with it.

After all, we do have other things to do, and discussing with another person their weaknesses is not always our favorite activity.

I have direct personal experience with this. When I first set up my consulting business I faced, for the first time in my career, the task of managing someone—my administrative assistant. I had (at least) two big problems in being a good manager.

First, my assistant was basically terrific, so it felt as if pointing out and discussing things that could have been done better was being demanding. (It is!)

Second, I did not feel confident about my interpersonal skills, and was not sure I could provide a constructive critique and get the reaction I wanted. What if, instead of responding, she took offense and quit?

As a result of these concerns, like many other managers, I decided to say and do nothing. After all, she was good overall, wasn't she? Why rock the boat?

I decided to save up all my critique and feedback for a full year, and then try to give it to her all at once, at "performance review" time, just like it said in the textbooks. (Or so I thought they said.)

This meant that I tried to give her feedback in one session on 17 different subjects, months after the events we were discussing had happened, right at the time when it would influence her pay.

Can you imagine a process less likely to get someone to listen, accept and respond? Yet it's how businesses and professional firms do it all the time.

A performance discussion at compensation-setting time is the absolute worst time to get someone to engage with you, acknowledge a performance issue, and participate in designing a solution. By having the conversation at that time, you are asking them to put their income at risk. Even if they are aware of their weaknesses, they often cannot afford to acknowledge them at such a time, because they probably need the money.

Eventually, I learned the lesson we all have to learn. If I really wanted my

assistant to improve, then the way to do it was the way it was done to me: dropping by on a casual basis to discuss a single topic at a time right when the weaknesses first became evident, and absolutely when it has nothing to do with pay!

I'm not saying I ever got truly good at it, but I did eventually understand what I should be trying to do!

Informal and Unscheduled

Whenever I have discussed, anywhere in the world, the story of my Harvard Business School colleague's coaching of me, there is almost universal agreement that a key to his successful impact on me was that his approach was informal and unscheduled.

Most people agree that they were most influenced in their own development overwhelmingly through informal interactions. Very few people attribute much influence, if any, to the formal processes they experienced, such as annual performance reviews, counseling sessions and even training programs.

One of the eternal mysteries of professional firms is that while we all know what worked on *us*, we keep putting in place other things (formal systems) for *them*.

The truth is that *all* formal, scheduled performance appraisal processes are doomed to failure. (See *Abolishing Performance Appraisals: Why They Backfire and What to do Instead* by Tom Coens and Mary Jenkins, Berrett-Koehler, 2000, for a similar and more detailed view.)

Performance appraisal systems in firms large and small *may* serve to help arrive at a compensation decision, meet statutory and regulatory requirement for

human resource management, or a host of other purposes. What they *never* do is cause performance to rise.

We have all lived through this. Only personal attention and coaching really help us (or them) develop.

He Talked about Me—and Only Me

Most people hearing my story remark on the fact that my senior colleague barely referred to the school (or the firm, company or institution) to which we both belonged.

He did not make appeals to my sense of responsibility or duty, such as, “Remember, these are our performance expectations, David. Let me remind you of your obligations.”

For that matter, he didn’t even talk about himself, his expectations, his reactions to my performance (“I’m a little disappointed in you, David”) or anything at all except...me.

The entire conversation was focused on me. Which, of course, made it completely fascinating.

He focused exclusively on helping me find what was interesting to me, not what was interesting to him, nor what was necessarily needed by the institution.

Many managers think they have influence when they talk about what “we” are trying to pull off, where “our” firm is going, what the world expects of us.

All of this can be valid, but it ignores a profound human truth: the most fascinating topic for most human beings is themselves. (Apparently, I am not the only egocentric person in the world.)

Talk to me about me, and you have my full attention. Talk to me about anything

else, and the odds that I will engage go down dramatically.

His approach was guided by a simple insight. If people set goals for themselves, guided by their own true interests, they are much more likely to pursue those goals with passion and get more done than if you give goals to them or attempt to tell them what to become interested in.

If I tell you what my goals are, I inevitably give you “nagging rights.” You can ask me about my progress towards the goals I set for myself without offending me. You have the right to manage me more, and more frequently.

However, if you try to get me to pursue *your* goals, not mine, then every time you ask about my progress towards *your* goals, I will feel resentment, and less will get done.

The point is meant to be a practical one, not a moral one. It just means that the coach will get better results for the institution if he or she finds out what the person is capable of being passionate about, and then finds a way to make that work for the institution. Done that way, everybody wins.

Of course, if the person is passionate about nothing or cares for things that don’t help the institution, then the coach’s task is clear: urgently and actively help the person leave the organization and pursue his or her passion (or lack of it) elsewhere.

My coach asked questions encouraging me to choose my own goals, but it should be equally clear that I was not going to get out of that meeting without choosing *something*. There was indeed an iron will beneath that courteous exterior.

He Seemed Interested

Not only was the conversation about me, but my colleague pulled off an amazing thing. He actually made me believe he was interested in me personally! He seemed to care, at least a little, about me as a person.

I invite you to reflect, at this point, on your own reactions. Would it matter to you if someone trying to counsel and coach you convinced you that he or she was interested in and cared about you? Would it matter to you? Would it make a difference?

Ask the same question in reverse: if you doubted their interest in and care for you, would that have any impact on the amount of influence they would have on you?

I am bold enough to guess that I know *your* answers. Whether or not the person is really interested in you has a major impact on that person's influence on *you*.

So if someone's influence on you depends upon whether or not you think they care about you, an interesting question arises. Can they fake interest and caring? Can other people make you think you are interested in them by learning the right skills, words and behaviors, or do they actually have to care?

Again, answer the question from your own experience: How readily do you think you can tell if someone is trying to make you think that they care, but really they do not? I can guess at your answer, but I know mine: You can perhaps fool me once, but not a second time!

In my book *The Trusted Advisor* (Free Press, 2000), my coauthors and I explored this same topic in the context

of dealing with clients, not peers or subordinates. It turns out that the issues and most of the answers are the same in all contexts.

As human beings, we accept the influence mostly, if not exclusively, of those we trust, and being trusted is mostly about true trustworthiness, not technique.

Whether or not the issue is sincerity or technique, the overwhelming majority of us, when conducting managerial and coaching conversations, fail to convince the other person that we are truly interested in them. Very often because we are not.

He Didn't Criticize

At no time did my colleague say anything negative about me. He did *not* criticize me, even though a critique would have been fair and valid. ("You're not doing any research, and it is expected around here. You're teaching is improving, but you're not one of the best yet.")

Why did he not criticize me? Because he was such a nice person? Perhaps. But mostly because he understood one of the primary truths about human beings, which is that *the absolute worst way to get someone to acknowledge and correct a weakness is to criticize them!*

As humans, we have a built-in reflex: criticize me and I will defend myself whether what you say is valid or invalid, fair or unfair.

Later in our relationship, I did ask my colleague why he had never actually voiced any critiques, and had led me to form my own conclusions about what he was "implying" but never actually stated.

“I learned long ago, David,” he said, “that if two people both know something is true, there’s not much point saying out loud.”

He continued, “There are better ways to get your point across. The key task is to create a way that the other person can concede the point without ‘losing face.’ It’s not easy to learn and to do, but it almost never includes explicitly criticizing people.”

He Actually Helped Me

Many people comment that it must have been very motivating that my colleague was substantively helpful to me, providing leads and contacts in order to get me started. It was.

I have surveyed professionals around the world for decades, and I frequently ask, “How many of you think that your manager, coach or supervisor actually *helps* you succeed (as opposed to demanding that you do)?” The percentages are depressingly small: often as low as 10 percent.

Yet consider the psychology of it. If someone has just asked *you* what you want to achieve and has taken the first step to help you get there, wouldn’t you feel an overwhelming obligation to take the next step? (For more on this psychological principle, see Robert Cialdini’s book *Influence* [Quill, 1984].)

The lesson for managers, coaches and supervisors (all synonymous terms as far as I am concerned) is obvious. If you want someone to respond to you, you must find out what they want and help them—first.

Every time you plan to meet with some one to give advice, counsel or direction, ask yourself, “Do I know how I am

going to help this person in a way that *they* would consider substantive help?”

If the answer is “no,” then you are not ready for the meeting.

He Focused on the First Doable Steps, Not the Ultimate Goal

Many people point out that my senior colleague did not focus much on the ultimate achievement or goal (e.g., “You need to write a book”) but on small, carefully chosen, doable first steps: “Do you think you can call these seven people?”

As obvious as this is, most of us break this rule all the time. We try and get people energized and motivated by setting performance standards and turning the person loose: “Here’s the world record...go!”

Instead, the truth of *tempting* someone onto the improvement path often requires that you remain completely silent about the full task ahead and just focus on the immediate small improvement.

In fact, that’s what good coaches do in all walks of life. Tell me I need to lose 50 pounds, and even if that extra weight is life threatening I will say “Forget it, I can’t do that, it’s not me.”

But say we are going to focus on losing one pound per week, and suddenly this sounds like something even David Maister, with his notorious lack of self-control, could do.

Similarly, coaches working with frontier athletes focus on one task at a time, reaching for small improvements in each area. They don’t “raise the bar” in large jumps; they increase it slowly and help the person make cumulative, repeated improvements. *That’s* how you help someone become a world-beater!

He Gave Me Confidence

In another recent article of mine (“Management: What It Really Takes,” www.davidmaister.com) I stress that you can’t really help someone improve until you figure out why they are underperforming.

In my case (surprising to those who know me now) my problem then was that I was not sure I *could do* research and writing. A large part of the explanation of why I got going after my colleagues visit was that his (explicit and implicit) confidence that I could pull this off removed what was for me (and, I am told in discussions worldwide, for many people) a major roadblock to accomplishment.

Kept His Word

The last detail I’ll discuss here is the fact that my colleague kept his word. He did what he said he was going to do. And he did it incredibly quickly.

Again, in virtually every culture around the world, people I discuss this with say that his prompt action would significantly increase the probability that they would act. It would be the height of impoliteness to drop the ball and ignore his action. Further, the cultural precedent had been set: you do what say you are going to do. Alas, these are not always cultural rules everywhere, and less gets done.

The message is clear: If you want your people to live up to their commitments and obligations, then you must first live up to yours. People will never live up to higher standards than the coach exhibits.

Last Thoughts

There clearly are other lessons to be gleaned from my story, but I hope I have touched on some major ones. I don’t think any of the lessons in this article are new or original to me. This has just been the story of how I learned them and came to understand them.

Others have written about them before. Dale Carnegie in *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (Simon & Schuster, 1936) remains the gold standard in learning how to interact with others. Blanchard and Johnson’s *The One Minute Manager* is a fabulous place to start for those who are completely new to thinking about all this. Peter Friedes’ book *The 2R Manager* (Jossey-Bass, 2002) gives a great deal of detail on what precisely a manager can say and do to be effective.

But there remains a mystery: if so many people have offered such practical wisdom, and their work has been so well disseminated and publicized, why do we all need to struggle so much to learn it and put it into practice?

My guess is that many of us frequently do apply the lessons and approaches of this article, but we tend to use them more often in our personal lives than in our work lives.

When dealing with good friends, parents, spouses or children, we are more likely to be informal, questioning, helpful, use the language of suggestion and offer our confidence-building support.

Why do we tend to take these approaches in such situations? Because the underlying commitment to the other person is there, we are used to be doing things informally and because we actually care.

When we care, we do it this way. When we don't, we don't. And in either case, we get back what we deserve.



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