

Spot Coaching

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Leading effectively in business is more challenging than ever. Leaders are asked to do more with fewer people, leaner budgets, increased regulation, tighter margins, competition coming out of the woodwork, and faster turnaround times. They often feel that they are being asked to make more bricks but are given less and less straw. They feel caught in the middle. After staff reductions (one of the first things companies tend to do when the business environment becomes stormy) leaders look at the decreasing number of people they have left, the increasing number of things that need to get done, and then sigh. They know their people need to do more, learn new skills, bridge the gaps once filled by other staffers now long gone, but they can't afford the time or money to take their people away from their jobs for development or training. More bricks, less straw, more sighs.

There is hope, though. The truth is that most training and development initiatives deliver far less than promised. This is one reason why training and development are usually the first things cut, just before staff levels, in down business times. When the business climate is unfavorable and leaders are in the bricks/straw/sigh mode, formal development for their staff is out of the question. Given the history of training/development, there may be a better method anyway. This staff development method costs little or nothing, has potentially greater impact, and requires no staff time away from their work. It also offers opportunities for leaders to practice and develop some core leadership skills themselves. An analogy from manufacturing may help here.

Many companies that manufacture and assemble metal components do not use welds all along the seam of the metal pieces they join. They have learned that spot-welding, if done powerfully, is just as strong as or stronger than welding the full length of the seam. Spot-welding also uses less energy, welding material, and time. Therefore it is less expensive than a full-seam weld but better. This is a very apt analogy for the kind of leadership intervention needed, especially when times are tough: spot coaching—powerful, brief, targeted "welding" of a person with a new or deeper skill. It is coaching on the spot. Let's look at an example.

Imagine that one of your staff keeps coming to you with a process problem or task you feel they ought to be able to do but, for some reason, they cannot complete on their own. In the past your frustration may have lead you to simply tell them what to do or do it yourself. Result? More work for you and no development of this skill in the staffer. Next time, spot-coach. Schedule a 5-10 minute time with them and invest the short coaching needed now to avoid their continued bringing of this task to you to fix in the future. Here are some specific steps for effective spot-coaching once you have recognized an opportunity for it and asked for/received the person's acknowledgment that some quick coaching would help:

1. **Ask** *open-ended questions* (ones that cannot be answered with a "yes" or "no") and suggest they take notes as you coach them. Examples of open-ended questions are: "What parts of this do you seem to understand pretty well?"; "What parts are still challenging for you?", and; "Where do you get stuck? When, together, you and the staffer have identified the part they can't do, keep asking them questions. Questions get them thinking about and owning the problem (which is theirs anyway, right?). Examples of follow-up questions are: "What have you tried in the past?"; "What was the result?"; "Who have you gotten help from before?"; "What did they suggest?"; "What have you tried this time?"; "What do you think the next step should be?", etc. *By asking questions you are teaching them to ask themselves these same questions when they face this or similar issues, to think about the problem, and to explore their responsibility for it.*
2. **Resist** their request (or your temptation) to "just do it for them so you/they can get back to work." This is THEIR work and they need to learn how to do it. This isn't YOUR work and you need *them to do it for themselves*. You have enough to do already. If you do it for them you will guarantee that they: (a) will never learn this skill, and; (b) will keep coming back to you with the expectation that you will do it for them. Stop this process now! They need to learn the skill and you need them to learn it so they, not you, can and will handle it from now on. They won't learn unless you coach them. The 5-10 minutes you invest now will pay off over and over again from now on.
3. **Suggest** *only the next step* if they can't tell you or show you. But suggest only after your open-ended questions have highlighted their area of confusion. If you suggest too quickly, you will keep them too dependent on you for problem solving thinking.
4. **Demonstrate** that step for them and ask them to execute the same step themselves while you watch. Now ask them to tell you the next step, demonstrate if needed, and watch them do it. Walk through the process asking, suggesting, demonstrating, and watching for each step until the process is complete. Remind them to keep taking notes.
5. **Ensure** they understand the process, have attempted each step once in front of you, and have complete notes. Now solidify your spot-coaching by asking them

to start from the beginning and talk or walk you through it as if they were teaching you (*they are actually teaching themselves* as they do this--another skill you want them to practice and perform regularly).

6. **Describe** to them, briefly and in positive terms, how the process they are learning fits into the whole picture of the work in that part of the company. Help them see why it is important that they learn and successfully perform this procedure.
7. **Express** your confidence that they will be able to do this, that you are there to help *after they have tried on their own and used their notes yet are still stuck*, and mention that their learning this skill will not only help them in their current job but it and others like it may open doors to them of larger responsibility and jobs of wider scope.

By identifying the key spots where focused, brief coaching is needed and spot coaching as necessary, you can help your people develop just what they need when they need it without spending large amounts of time, resources, and effort providing broad-based training or development. Doing this also gives you practice and *helps you develop the coaching skills all great leaders need* to maximize the performance of their team. Such coaching doesn't have to take hours and doesn't have to cover everything. Like joining two metal components, a weld along the entire seam is overkill when several powerful ones are perfect if they are at the right spot. Spot-coach someone today!