

Leadership Development

Successful Leaders Are Great Coaches

by Bill George and Zach Clayton

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Summary. More and more executives are realizing that the successful leader must be a good coach. But what do good coaches do? The authors cover five areas: Care for your teammates, Organize them into their “sweet spot,” Align them around the organization’s purpose and values, Challenge them to reach their full potential, and Help them reach their goals. [close](#)

Leadership is going through massive changes as the Baby Boomers transfer power to emerging leaders in the Gen X, Millennial, and Gen Z generations. That generational change is bringing with it a shift in leadership style, from leaders as capable managers to leaders as great coaches of people.

While in recent years many leaders have hired external coaches, some have gone further, conceptualizing their jobs as executives as fundamentally about coaching. An example of a great coach is Bill Campbell, who started his career as coach of Columbia University’s football team and later became known as the “Coach of Silicon Valley.” Bill acted as a trusted confidant and executive coach to many of the entrepreneurs who built Silicon Valley, including Google co-founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin, current Alphabet CEO Sundar Pichai, Apple’s Steve Jobs, Facebook’s Sheryl Sandberg, Amazon’s Jeff Bezos, and Twitter’s Jack Dorsey. Campbell rejected the notion of “command-and-control” leadership, saying, “Your title makes you a manager; your people make you a leader.”

Just as great athletes seek out great coaches, the best people want to work for leaders who coach them to reach their full potential and who will help them become better coaches themselves. What does it mean to conceptualize leadership as coaching? To answer that, we have developed the acronym COACH to describe how today's leaders should work with people. As a coaching leader, you need to **Care** for your teammates, **Organize** them into their "sweet spot," **Align** them around the organization's purpose and values, **Challenge** them to reach their full potential, and **Help** them reach their goals.

Let's examine each element of these five aspects that make great coaching leaders.

Care: Build Understanding and Trust

These days people will not engage their full selves — mind, body, and spirit — until they believe their leader cares about them. They seek a personal connection with their leader before they will invest themselves wholly in their jobs. That requires leaders to provide a level of access, openness, and depth that once was taboo.

In our experience in organizations and in the classroom, many leaders from the Baby Boomer generation are reluctant to open up to employees and prefer dealing primarily with their direct reports. That is increasingly a liability, as today's employees demand both connection and authenticity in their leaders. They

can sniff out phonies in seconds and aren't interested in working with them. So coaching leaders need to demonstrate from the outset that they genuinely care about their teams, not only with regard to the team's overall performance — but in terms of how individuals are faring in their working lives.

As CEO of Carlson Companies, the hospitality and travel company, Marilyn Carlson Nelson says she converted the company culture by personally demonstrating how much she cared for her employees. She notes, “Satisfied employees create satisfied customers. In the service business, customers understand very quickly whether you legitimately care for them.”

Organize: Get People in Their Sweet Spot

The second task of the leader as coach is to know and understand their team members' strengths and weaknesses and their motivations and desires. They use that information to organize their team so that everyone is operating in their “sweet spot” where their strengths and intrinsic motivations intersect. When people are working in their sweet spot, they are inspired, energized, fulfilled, and passionate about their jobs and will succeed in their work.

Creating a sweet spot-focused organizational culture necessitates leaders working with their team members directly, not staying removed in an office or conference room. Even more importantly,

coaching leaders are in the marketplace, where they get to observe people working with customers to understand how their team members' strengths intersect with customer needs and wants.

As important as these direct interactions are, they're even more powerful when combined with real-time data collection through employee surveys. The results help verify what the leader sees in daily interactions, and can inform decisions to build an empowered, well-organized team where everyone is tapping into their strengths.

Align: Unite People Around a Common Vision and Purpose

Of all the tasks required of the leader as coach, aligning employees with the company's purpose and values is the most challenging. In many large organizations, people struggle to connect their personal purpose with the organization's purpose. For many employees, identifying with enterprise-wide goals that seem lofty or disconnected from their day-to-day duties is simply a bridge too far. The leader's job is to bring those statements to life and make the company's purpose and values relatable to every employee's work.

Jim Whitehurst, former CEO of open-source software company Red Hat, was able to do that by rallying employees behind its open-source mission and zeal for transparency and openness. "If

people just work for a paycheck, they won't go the extra mile, but if they believe in a purpose that transcends profit, they will give all they have," Whitehurst says.

Challenge: Summon People's Best

Just as the best athletes and top leaders actively search for coaches who enable them to reach their full potential, so do employees and younger leaders. They aren't looking for leaders who will make it easy for them; on the contrary, they want to be challenged.

They want to work for leaders like former Amgen CEO Kevin Sharer, who insisted that his leadership team provide employees with honest and constructive feedback, establish high performance standards, use measurable goals to track progress, and conduct reality-based, results-focused operating reviews.

The leader as coach must be comfortable stretching people, pushing them outside their comfort zone en route to personal and professional growth. In doing so, they not only become better performers, but will emerge as future leaders.

Help: Solve Problems and Celebrate Success

Under command-and-control management, executives created their strategy, structure, and processes and then delegated the work to subordinates for execution. Later they reviewed results

and judged people by their numerical outcomes. That hands-off approach won't fly today as leaders are no longer judges but colleagues.

Coaching leaders personally engage with employees in their workplace and help them think through options and solve difficult problems. When things go well, they participate in award ceremonies or sales meetings to recognize people for their accomplishments. When he was CEO of Merck, Roy Vagelos regularly ate in the company cafeteria, asking people about their work and their challenges. Often, he called them up later to offer his ideas to help solve their problems.

Our Own Evolution

We write this as fellow journeyers, not as experts who have figured everything out. Both of us have evolved our own leadership, moving from traditional management practices to coaching.

As CEO of Medtronic, Bill spent the bulk of his time with employees in factories, labs, offices, and hospitals, developing a deep sense of care for Medtronic employees and respect for their commitment to the Medtronic Mission. However, major organization changes were required to get people in their sweet spot and align them around Medtronic's purpose and values. By challenging people to perform at higher levels and providing the help they needed, the business became a resounding success.

Three years after founding Three Ships at age 24, Zach, a Millennial, was confronted by his teammates, who pummeled him in a 360-degree assessment for focusing too much on his own ability to get things done quickly, and for setting standards that others couldn't meet. As a result, he began to shift his yardstick of success from individual achievement to team achievement. A decade later, he is still amid this journey, as he solicits frequent feedback from his team. His changes have enabled the business to grow much faster.

Our experiences aren't uncommon. Our conversations with hundreds of leaders, from MBAs to CEOs, have convinced us that an important shift is occurring. The model of leadership is changing, for the better, and the winning formula is being a good coach.

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