

On behalf of Pracownia Rozwoju, welcome to another podcast prepared especially for managers as a part of Mental Comfort Program. My name is Mirosław Tarasiewicz and I deal with training in the field of leadership, presentation, managerial communication and, last but not least, coaching. In this podcast I will talk about the application of coaching in managerial practice. You will learn what coaching is, what makes it effective and in which business situations we can use coaching methods, and when it is better to use something else. I will share my experience with the use of coaching in managerial practice – what works and what should be avoided? Feel free to join me.

If you asked hundred managers how they understand and define coaching, you probably would get hundred different answers. Some of them similar, some of them completely different. There is nothing surprising in this, because coaching is a form of development around which a lot of misunderstandings and myths have appeared in recent years. The idea of coaching is often twisted or sometimes even ridiculed in the business services market. That's why it's worth taking a closer look at coaching from a manager's point of view to judge on our own its usefulness in our business environment. In other words, to consider when and towards whom in our team should we use coaching techniques in order to achieve optimal results.

### **What coaching is not**

Let's start our story by saying what coaching certainly is not. Coaching for sure is not a training in which a trainer or a manager shares his knowledge and experience with the trainees or the team. It's not a training even if it's individual, addressed to a specific person and covering their individual needs and challenges. The only similarity between an individual training and coaching is the full focus on the participant's individual needs and challenges, but it's definitely too little to equate these two forms of development.

Coaching is also not equal to mentoring, the essence of which is a partnership between the master and the pupil and is focused on discovering and developing the pupil's potential. Generally, both forms have a similar, if not an identical, goal, but in mentoring a pupil makes the most of mentor's knowledge and experience, while in coaching the coachees' development is based only on their own experience, thoughts and reflections. A coach is only a facilitator in the process. At this point you're probably asking yourself why is it like that? What sense does it make? Can this method be effective at all? These questions are understandable and we'll answer them in a moment.

In business (and even in training) practice coaching also often refers to the process of giving feedback. A manager inviting an employee for a coaching conversation and conducting it according to FUKO, SBIC or another characteristic feedback method is a very common view in organizations worldwide.

Lastly, coaching is also not a motivational speech, although motivational speakers are often called, or call themselves, coaches. Maybe it's because they, apart from giving inspirational speeches, also work with effective coaching processes, but a motivational speech has nothing to do with coaching.

### **The essence of coaching**

Since we already know what coaching is not, we can try defining what it actually is. It's difficult to give one widely accepted definition - it's because there are too many. Most of them, however, have a few common elements which quite well describe the coaching process.

We have already mentioned the first element. In the coaching process the coach is only as much and so much as a facilitator. On no account does coach share their knowledge and experience. The person being coached, the coachee, comes to solutions to problems that are the subject of the session on his own, and the coach only helps in this. How? By asking inspiring, thought-provoking questions. At first glance this process may seem like a waste of time. Why ask questions when the coach already knows

the answers? In the case of managerial coaching, when the coach is often also the supervisor, this is an extremely common situation the manager has often already faced the discussed problem and solved it, maybe tried different approaches and chose the best one - then why should the coachee reinvent the wheel?

However, questions' role is twofold. On the one hand, if we identify ourselves with the solution and treat it as ours, then the probability to implement it into our life greatly increases. One of the basic rules of social influence, formulated by Robert Cialdini, applies here. It's called 'the principle of commitment and consistency' and tells us how, when we make a decision or adopt a position regarding an issue, we encounter, both in ourselves and in others, strong desire to continue actions in consistence with what we've already got involved in.

Michał Koterski has formulated this in simpler words in the movie Day of the Wacko (Dzień Świra) with the words 'my truth is more mine than yours', but the point remains the same. This way we avoid one of the most common management traps called 'the knowing-doing gap'. It describes the situation in which, when we already know how to solve a problem, our interest in it automatically drops. We think that someday we'll start implementing the solution into our lives – maybe tomorrow, maybe in a week, but usually never. If the subject of coaching is the development of soft skills, sometimes very subtle, where it's hard to define tangible deadlines, then such a scenario is more than possible. The task of a manager is to lead his/her people through such a trap and make the word come true. Coaching, along with its principle of creating solutions by the coachee, works perfectly here.

The second benefit coming from creating solutions by the coachee is based on Alan Greenspan's known maxim 'The map is not the territory'. The core of this saying is the assumption, known even in Plato's times, that each person perceives the reality through individual filters and what he or she view as the objective reality might actually be quite subjective. Everybody has their own map of the territory, which, no matter how precise, is not the territory itself. When it comes to business – everybody has their own view of reality and the issues they and their organization face. Both the manager-coach and the coachee have their own maps. And it happens that the employees' map is more precise, which means their view is more accurate than the manager's. It's because they've got their own, more personal perspective and different aspects of an issue are more important to them. From the point of view of the organization and the managers themselves it's not worth presenting ready solutions – they should rather let the employees search and create them themselves. Surprisingly often the process of coaching ends for the manager-coach in a discovery and a thought 'How did I not think of it earlier?' as well.

Another aspect of the situation is that in today's turbulent business environment the territory changes exceptionally fast. It means that even if yesterday the manager's map was more precise than that of a team member, today it might be the other way around. Metaphorically speaking, your employees might be faster in correcting their maps and today their view of reality is more accurate than yours.

We cannot also forget that the main goal of coaching is long-term employee development. And let's be honest – even the best manager doesn't know the capability and potential of employees better than employees themselves. Moreover, nobody knows employees' needs better than the employees' themselves

### **When we use managerial coaching**

If coaching has so many advantages, should managers use coaching methods in every situation? The answer to this question is the same as in the case of the question about the effectiveness of any other management tool everything has its time and place. There are situations when coaching shows higher

effectiveness than other methods, but there are also situations when its use would be just irrational from a business point of view.

In order to define when a manager has the opportunity to coach and can effectively apply coaching methods, let's look at the matter from two perspectives. First - in relation to whom to apply this method and second - when.

Coaching can't be applied equally effectively to every employee. The essence of coaching is to find solutions based on the knowledge and experience of the person coached. Therefore, it can not be a person completely new to the business or the organization. In this case there is simply nothing to build on. Training and mentoring are much more effective in this situation. We can think about coaching after some time, when the required business maturity appears. Then the coaching process will bring the expected effect.

Second - even in situations where the coach is already experienced, coaching will not always make business sense. We should use it when we see that an employee can improve their performance, but the situation is not so serious that we have to intervene immediately. It is best to define for yourself acceptable, safe and common sense limits of deviation from your goal. If the employee is not achieving the goal, but the performance is within the assumed acceptable limits, then coaching can be an effective solution. If the results go beyond the safe limits, we should use less subtle methods, such as constructive feedback. Anyway, as we said, often even called coaching, but having nothing to do with it.

From my business practice, I can say that the most difficult thing is probably not just defining acceptable boundaries but maintaining self-discipline and refraining from using other methods when we have the perfect coaching opportunity. But believe me - it is worth it. Your team will appreciate it, and the long-term positive impact on the business will certainly be greater.

### **The issue of responsibility**

In the classic coaching process, perhaps the biggest controversy is that the responsibility for the outcome of the process lies with the person being coached and not the coach. When I first heard about this, I thought to myself: Clever, the coach puts himself in the role of facilitator, question generator without any responsibility for the answers and outcome of the process. Life could not be any better. However, the matter is not as simple as it seems, and such an attitude of responsibility for the outcome makes deep sense. The essence of coaching is to reach and activate the reserves dormant in each of us. No one can help the person being coached in this. The coach supports him/her in finding the reserves and ways of activating them, but at the end of the day it's mainly up to the coach how things will turn out. It is his responsibility to implement the appropriate changes. If he accepts this responsibility, the process has a good chance to succeed. If the coach was responsible for the outcome, it would be a great excuse for the person being coached to shift to the coach the effort of getting out of the comfort zone and implementing the change. Then we would have a situation, not so rare again, in which our employee really wants to be developed and not to develop.

This is how it works in live coaching or in sessions led by an external coach. And it works quite well. In managerial coaching, the matter is more complex, because the manager has to take into account the interest of the organization he represents and a complete transfer of responsibility to the coached person is rather impossible. It is hard to imagine a situation, when a manager uses coaching methods, the effects are unfortunately small, and in response to his superiors' comments the manager answers "I work in a coaching way, I am not responsible for the outcome of the process".

How to solve this dilemma? Well, if in the assumed time horizon no effects are visible, it is probably enough to end the coaching process and change the method of work. There is nothing wrong with that, let's remember that all actions of a manager have to be optimized from the point of view of business effect. And this is just such a situation.

### **Manager-coach dilemmas**

In business, we are always under time pressure. There is always too little of it, and moreover, it is the only resource that no one can buy for money. What to do when, during a coaching session, time begins to run out, deadlines are looming and our employee is still looking for a solution, which, on top of that, we know perfectly well. We can wait patiently, but every hour 60 minutes pass, which will not come back. We can simply end the coaching and authoritatively say "Just do it this way". But we can also use a compromise solution that at least partially preserves the benefits of the coaching work already done.

The solution is to present several options and ask the employee to evaluate them. We do this in a simple way, saying for example "I remember a similar situation, we were thinking of several options at the time. They were a) b) and c). Which one do you think would work in this situation?" The next question might be "What do you think needs to be changed in this solution to make it work effectively in this particular situation?" By involving the employee in the discussion, choosing an option and refining it, there is a good chance that the consistency and commitment rule will work, and we will achieve a pretty good result.

Another situation that can happen to a manager working according to coaching methods is what I call "false discovery". The person we are working with approaches the issue with commitment, generates many solutions and, to our astonishment, finally chooses one which we know will not be effective. What is more, he is fascinated by his discovery, absolutely convinced of it and immediately wants to put it into practice. From the point of view of the purity of the process, the coach should remain neutral, not judge the solution and allow for possible failure.

From an organizational point of view, however, such behavior can be quite risky, also for the manager. On the other hand, a critical evaluation of the chosen solution, even if we explicitly communicate beforehand that we are ending the coaching process, will certainly hamper the engagement and creativity of our employee. A solution that works quite often is to redirect the conversation to the expected results of the implementation of the chosen solution. In most cases, the coached person independently comes to the conclusion that the chosen solution is not as ideal as it seemed and looks for another one.

### **The basic skill of a coach**

The basic tool of a manager working in the coach style are of course properly asked questions. They bring a reflection in the coachee and provoke them to seek answers for the existing challenges. The primary kind of questions are the open questions starting with words „what“ or „how“. It's good to use calibrated open questions. They encourage to giving an elaborate answer and prevent us from running from the subject into unnecessary digressions. A question „What else can you do?“ is an open question. A question „What else can you do in order to improve your relationship with your colleague?“ is a calibrated open question, if, of course, the topic of the session is improving the relationship with said colleague.

The questions we ask must make up a logical structure eventually leading to taking action. A common pattern in manager coaching is the „six question“ method, or more accurately, the „six groups of questions“ method. We start by defining the desired state. Most people tend to focus on problems instead of seeking for solutions. When an employee describes a problem too prolixly, it's good to ask

a question "What do you think it should look like?". It effectively redirects the conversations to seeking for solutions.

The second question concerns the benefits for the coach and the organization. For example, it might be „What benefits will reaching your goal give you?”. Among other things, this question helps to gauge whether the problem indeed is worth investing resources into solving it. If it does, it helps the coachee better visualize the goal and the benefits that come with it.

The third question is the key part, because it's the phase when the possible solutions are created. In the simplest version the question is „What can you do to achieve your goal?” However, usually one question isn't enough and we need to ask other, precise and calibrated follow-up questions. The goal is generating (by the employee) a few, usually from 3 to 5, realistic, possible to deploy solutions.

The fourth step is the phase of choosing the best solution. We ask „Which of these options will help you reach your goal soonest?” and we pick a specific solution.

The fifth step is tuning the chosen solution. The easiest way of testing it is asking about risks. For example, it might be „What kind of risk might occur?” and then follow-up with „How are we going to handle this?”.

And eventually the final step, which is initiating the action. Now the most effective question is „What will be your first step?”. It is because creating a detailed plan defeats the purpose, the modern environment changes too quickly. We should have an agile approach to our chosen solution and asking about the first step perfectly suits this philosophy.

Of course, it's only one of various patterns of action. Other effective patterns are working with dilemmas, changing the perspective, that's especially important in working on improving relationships, or work with virtual mentors. Unfortunately, this podcast is too short to discuss them all.

In the end, there's one practical advice. We should avoid questions starting with the word „Why?”. They might be perceived as too aggressive, undermining their choices and motivations. A question „Why did you do it?” might be perceived as a beginning of judgement. When we change it to „What made you act this way?” we ask about more or less objective reasons of the decision, without judging or undermining it.

There are many more trap questions that we may fall to very easily. In the case of manager coaching, they often come from the place of the empathy of the manager who wants to help in finding the best solution. Avoiding these traps is one of the subjects of our planned classes. When we treat manager coaching seriously, we must ask ourselves a question about proofs of its effectiveness. In regard to the variety of coaching goals, the great number of methods and dynamics of the business environment, it's difficult to do a study based on strict methodology of scientific experiments. The proofs for effectiveness of this method are usually more or less systematic observations.

One of the first experiments comparing a group of coaches and a control group was done in 2003 by Smither, London and Morgan. The experiment lasted a year; 1361 managers participated, 404 of which were taking part in a coaching program and the others were the control group. In the end of the process the participants taking part in the coaching program got better ratings in the matter of using feedback and specificity of their goals. What's most important, their employers rated their efficiency much higher. The differences were statistically significant.

In another study, done in 2013 by Levi and Nieminen, 469 managers participated. Afterwards the coaches got better ratings in the areas of involvement, coherence of actions and realization of long term goals/plans.

There have also appeared first meta-analyses in the matter of coaching. Rebecca Jones and her coworkers summarized 17 studies on the effectiveness of coaching. The general conclusion confirmed the usefulness of this method, especially in development of specific competences, emotional control and individual results of work.

In conclusion, coaching isn't a panacea for all the managers' gripes, but when it's wisely and rationally applied it contributes to a significant development of competences.