

5.6 Setting the Right Climate for Coaching

We coach to help someone. It might be to help an individual learn something new, or help them over some difficulties they have been having with their performance. It might be to help them rise above their own expectations, but it's never to embarrass, punish, or push them around. If you're *not* trying to help someone, you're not coaching!

Coaching involves much more than identifying an opportunity, working out what a person's particular needs are, and "going for it." There might be a lot of temptation to jump in and make adjustments as you go, but most people who have tried to establish a coaching relationship by doing just that will tell you that it's not the smart way to go about things.

To give your coaching intervention the best chance of success, you need to do your homework and make sure that the climate you establish helps the coaching to go forward positively. The pre-planning stage is critical.

Early on, the coach will typically come up with some sense of how performance can be improved.

How you introduce the idea is very important. If the person sees it as a criticism of what they've been doing instead of an opportunity to develop and grow, they will likely react negatively.

Of course, there are many other reactions that need to be carefully considered. What about the person's age and experience? Might they feel embarrassed by being coached? What can you do to allay their fears and embarrassment? Are there any cultural or gender issues that might lead to confusion about your motives for coaching? What might they be and how can you address them?

Putting yourself in the other person's shoes and thinking about whether or not they'll welcome the opportunity you are offering them through coaching is a good step in the right direction. A key question to ask at this stage is: "Does the person trust me?" If your answer to the question is "no," your chances of quickly building a good coaching relationship are not good. Trust is the basis of good coaching, but it has to be two-way: Not only does the person you are coaching have to trust you, but you have to trust them. You want the relationship to grow as a partnership—that's how to make it a successful experience.

Trust is the key to overcoming initial defensiveness to coaching, but if you find the person you are trying to coach a bit "edgy" about the situation, you need to find out why they are that way. It's tempting to try to make them feel better by telling them that everything's going to be fine and they shouldn't worry about it. However, this rarely works as a way of allaying fears or difficulties. What you need to do is gently probe for the reasons: Ask questions to open the person up, and get them to tell you what their concern is. By carefully questioning and listening to an individual's answers, you should be able to find out exactly what it is that's bothering them or holding them back. Then you can set their mind at ease or make some suggestions.

The process of overcoming defensiveness or resistance to the coaching you are offering can be helped if you have some understanding of the different ways people think, “hear,” and talk. This is how to build rapport with the person you are coaching. Rapport is a key ingredient to good coaching, because it helps you to influence the other person in a positive way.

When you are trying to build rapport, make sure that your face and body are not saying that you have negative feelings about what they have done or are doing. The effective coach should always try to smile and put the individual at ease by being at ease themselves.

It’s not a good time to try and build rapport with someone if you’re “up to your armpits in alligators” and wishing that you were doing something else. It is obviously wiser to pick a time when you can give people your undivided attention and are ready to work to gain their trust and confidence. One thing that can really help build rapport is to be self-revealing—to share experiences that are similar to the experiences of the person you’re coaching. Use first names and speak in normal conversational language when you coach.