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Do Your Coaches Truly Coach? Effective coaching requires as much structure as any learning program.

I've been spending a lot of time with companies doing all they can to create a more productive and self-reliant workforce. These days agility is a great competitive advantage, one that supports an environment where learners can perform at or above the speed of change.

Information no longer has a shelf life. We can't wait to schedule a class to keep everyone up-to-date. Learners need immediate, contextual access to the latest information and best practices to help them perform at their highest levels.

This information is often owned in the trenches, not in the classroom or with the learning organization. Therefore, access to subject-matter experts is essential. Crowdsourcing best practices in an efficient and scalable way is at the heart of these efforts. Many are turning to formal coaching programs to fill the gap, but are we enhancing these efforts to create the end result we're looking for?

Coaching programs can be incredibly effective, but they use an organization's most precious resource: human capital. As a chief financial officer of a large technology company once told me, "The last thing I want is to be paying two people to do one person's job." Often coaching programs sound great on paper, but if left unattended and unstructured, they can create the opposite of an informed, productive, self-reliant worker. There are three main drawbacks to coaching programs — scalability of effective coaching skills, the quality of information shared and degree of learner dependency. Consider these ways to improve them.

Scalability of effective coaching: A good coach is hard to replicate. Although many want to coach, few are intrinsically qualified, and often those who do it well struggle to help others follow suit. Two levels of structure should be present in a successful coaching program: the tools with which to coach and the skills needed to coach others. Many organizations realize this need and are instituting classes on effective coaching. These kinds of programs are not only about the transfer of knowledge or demonstrating how to perform a task, but also they are about enabling the people being coached to perform on their own.

Quality of the information shared: Coaches are only as effective as the information and best practices they share. Many are walking the halls unconsciously incompetent, meaning the information or skill they thought was current one day may be out of date the next. Some type of structure and governance needs to be established to help coaches remain current. Yes, their field

knowledge is the most powerful asset they bring to this experience, but that information needs to be constantly validated and updated.

Degree of learner dependency: This may be the most overlooked competency in an effective coaching program. Although coaches possess information, skills and best practices that those they are coaching do not, their fundamental job is not to continue to own this knowledge, but to enable others to perform a skill and maintain this information without them. Many coaches love coaching and the gratification that comes with helping and supporting others. This is admirable but should not be their ultimate outcome.

Every coach's goal should be to create an environment where coaching isn't needed. Basically they should put themselves out of business, not grow a fan club. To do this, coaches need to surround themselves with tools that help them enable others to perform like them. They also need the coaching skills to effectively teach independence. This is a new role for learning leaders, but our job is to help coaches "teach others to fish." Like fishing, there are skills to do it well and equipment that makes it easier. The same goes for coaching.

As learning leaders transition themselves away from being the central point of learning in the enterprise, we need to step up and understand our new role as aggregators of knowledge and skills, not "owners." Coaching programs can be a powerful resource in a world that's moving faster than ever. But to do them well requires the same level of structure and attention we have traditionally given our classrooms and e-learning programs.

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