

Coaching in a Teaming Environment

A Big Challenge, A Bigger Reward

ROBERT F. HALLE

In today's acquisition reform environment, more and more people are realizing the value of coaching in a team-oriented setting. This article is the story of how the U.S. Army Tank-automotive Research, Development, and Engineering Center (TARDEC), in Warren, Mich., underwent a significant reorganization in 1994, from a top-down management structure to an organization based on teaming. It describes several coaching theories that, in my opinion, are equally applicable to coaching the individual employee.

From Top-Down to Teaming

Since its creation in the 1950s, TARDEC's managerial chain was defined by a traditional top-down structure. This organizational structure worked well for many years. As new missions were built, TARDEC hired the technical, administrative, and managerial personnel required to "get the job done." This "mission-hiring" process continued through the 1980s to the point where TARDEC had grown to become one of the leading ground vehicle research and development facilities in the world.

The downside of this "mission-hiring" process was that TARDEC's formal organization had grown into a rather large and cumbersome structure that was very expensive to maintain.

In the 1990s, faced with shrinking technology-based funding, Army downsizing, and base closures, TARDEC recognized that it must radically change the way it conducted business or cease

to exist. Specifically, TARDEC needed to become a fast-moving, creative organization that could respond *quickly* to the evolving requirements of the user while simultaneously responding to their own downsizing problems.

TARDEC's solution was to abolish their top-down management structure and replace it with an organization based on teaming. TARDEC's managers believed that this new structure could employ the combined creative force of the entire organization to meet the emerging requirements of the Army of the 21st century.

Inevitably, a number of difficulties were associated with such a radical reorganization. For TARDEC this was a completely new way of doing business. Restructuring removed the many levels of supervision, eventually leaving only six directors to lead the straight-lined organization of over 1,000 people. Managers believed that empowering teams to conduct TARDEC's day-to-day business activities would leverage and maximize the creative influence of the entire organization. This change, however, made the lower levels of supervision redundant and obsolete.

Most of the non-supervisory employees in TARDEC embraced the reorganization because empowerment presented them with a greater challenge to broaden their opportunities for creative and professional fulfillment. Where reorganization hit the hardest was the supervisors who would not be supervisors anymore.

Many believed it would reduce, if not remove their authority, leaving them with little to do. They could not have been more wrong.

Change is Hard

The ex-supervisors at TARDEC underwent the greatest career change during the reorganization. They had to change from being supervisors of subordinates to coaches of empowered teams who were tasked to figure out how to produce TARDEC's products and services. It was this change that was the hardest for the ex-supervisors because they had to learn how to do a completely new job.

A direct relationship exists between change and learning. The proverbial wisdom of "You can't teach an old dog new tricks," really doesn't hold true, and a person *can* change by learning.

Generally speaking, if your situation changes, you have to change with it. Your first response is to apply what you have learned in past experiences to cope with the change. For example, if you are standing in a road in front of a speeding bus, you know you should get out of the way. This perfectly normal response is something you learned in the past. You've learned that if that bus hits you, it will hurt!

But what if you are faced with a completely new situation that you never experienced before? You have no choice but to learn new responses, skills, and capabilities to survive. People have certain personality traits that facilitate (or

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preclude) their response to learning. The ability to respond to change with learning can be described in four Response Factors (R-Factors): The Overwhelmed, The Entrenched, The BSer, and The Learner.¹ The R-Factor will determine whether they will be able, or willing, to excel in the changing organization. It should be noted that no matter how firmly dug into a particular R-Factor people are, they can change. They just have to learn how to change.

THE OVERWHELMED

Overwhelmed Employees withdraw from change although they often take potshots from the sidelines. They avoid the necessary learning and personal change, hoping – without a lot of faith – that somehow things will return to normal. In order to improve, people must learn to deal with their frustration, either personally or through counseling, and not let it overshadow the need to change. People must take control of their situation by taking small, success-oriented steps that will gradually build up the confidence that they can actually survive in this new environment.

THE ENTRENCHED

Unlike the Overwhelmed, those who cope with organizational change with R-Entrenched behavior patterns are often productive. However, they severely restrict their own personal potential. They can change but are uncomfortable with it. They will frequently perform work that is useful to the organization, though they usually do it in ways that are narrow and limiting. At the same time, they expend much more energy than is necessary.

When our environment changes and we need to do things differently, Entrenched people have a natural response to work harder at the way they did things before the change. Like the Overwhelmed, Entrenched people must understand it is natural to be frustrated with change. They must seek feedback, encouragement, and support during their difficult transition. They must be made aware of the necessity for the change so that they can more easily cope with the change. In executing their new duties, they must



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be able to leverage on the aspects of their old duties that they do perform well, while gently phasing in the new capabilities required to be effective in the new environment.

THE BSER

BSer's have a high comfort level with change, and this is what others see and at least initially admire. While the Entrenched know what to do (high capacity for change) but have an extremely difficult time making it happen, the BSer's have no problem making something happen – often anything – but have no idea how to learn or have any desire to change (low capacity for change). They have a need to press for action and activity without any grounding in theory or understanding of why they are doing it.

The BSer's are probably the most dangerous people in the organization. Because of their ability to persuasively sell an action, they can easily lead the Overwhelmed and the organization down a path of change, often the wrong path. The BSers should be carefully monitored until they finally "get it." Their transition will be slower than most since they have a deep difficulty with learning. They should be provided with long-term developmental assignments that gently push them into the learning program.

THE LEARNER

The Learners are the primary drivers of change. They respond actively to change, engaging the issues and challenges and growing as people. They are the champions that energize and drive the organization to change. They are in a sense the adhesive, or "glue" that holds the organization together. The Learners are the ones who mark the distinction between organizations that will grow and those that will die. Without a critical mass of people who have the ability to learn from experience, a changing organization will fall apart.

Back to the Ex-Supervisors

Which leads us back to the ex-supervisors [now referred to as "coaches"] and

their difficulty with the changing environment at TARDEC. They expected to lose responsibility and power — *they were wrong*. They had actually been promoted to levels of *greater responsibility* and, ultimately, were to become the glue that would hold the TARDEC organization together. In essence, they had to become the “learners” and lead the change.

Before the reorganization, they were responsible only for their individual branch, division, or directorate. Now they were responsible for the entire TARDEC organization and, most importantly, coaching the teams that made up TARDEC. If they didn’t take the reorganization seriously, neither would the teams they coached. If they embraced the reorganization and approached it as a unique challenge and opportunity to improve TARDEC, so would the teams. In a sense, the coaches had become, perhaps the most important people at TARDEC.

Coaching

What is a coach?^{2,3,4,5} The term “coach” can be, and usually is, defined in many different ways. Probably the most traditional definition of a coach in a business environment is: a person who is a counselor, a mentor, and a tutor. In my personal opinion, a coach is “a person who inspires another person to improve and remain challenged.”

How can someone become a coach? Coaching can really be divided into three interrelated focuses: leading by example; supporting and mentoring; and driving organizational objectives that will focus the efforts of the team.

LEADING BY EXAMPLE

Coaches are role models whom others can respect. It is this respect that will open their team’s minds to learning. If coaches are not respected, then teams and individuals will not learn from them. The old saying, “Do as I say, not as I do,” does not hold true for coaches. They will be watched and emulated by those being coached. This is especially true when it comes to ethical conduct in and out of the office. If coaches leave work a few minutes early each day, so will others.

After all if the coaches are doing it, it must be all right.

Coaches must establish high standards of performance. Working hard is contagious, and others will learn from their coach’s example: that to excel in an organization one must work very hard. Continuously seeking out new challenges and meeting those challenges is the only way to succeed in a changing environment [remember the traits of a “Learner”?]. Everyone in the organization must take on the challenges if that organization is to be a success. Only through their coaches’ example will others increase their own, personal contributions.

Coaches must be accountable. Often through empowerment, coaches can play a detached role when it comes to their team’s success or failure. After all, if teams are empowered to accomplish a task, then they should be responsible for any mistakes or failures. While this is certainly true, coaches, likewise, should also feel accountable for their team’s mistakes or failures, and use failure as a learning experience from which to improve upon their own coaching methods. Once coaches learn from mistakes and failures and discern where their team

failed or erred, they can then use the information to develop improved coaching methods, further improving their team’s performance.

Coaches must be the glue that holds the organization together. The optimism demonstrated by coaches will be reflected by most of the people they come in contact with. If coaches think the new organization will succeed, so will those around them.

SUPPORTING AND MENTORING

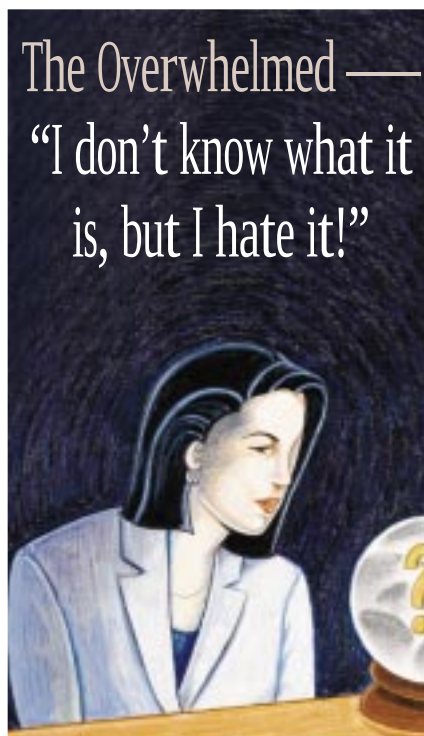
Coaches will find that supporting and mentoring their teams consumes the single greatest portion of their time. As a result, a critical goal for coaches is to increase the independence of their team. In effect, coaches have one clear-cut objective that stands out: *to put themselves out of a job*. While this is never possible due to the constantly changing environment and the turnover in personnel, the ability of coaches to minimize their mentoring frees them to focus on broader, organizational-level challenges.

The efforts of coaches to mentor/support their teams can be divided into eight areas:

- Inspire Continuous Growth
- Provide Focus
- Be Flexible When Working With Different Teams
- Realize and Minimize Mistakes
- Motivate
- Continually Reevaluate
- Identify Weak Performers
- Listen

Inspire Continuous Growth

A changing environment requires continuous learning. Coaches must stimulate the team to continuously seek new competencies and skills to deal with the changing environment. Coaches should work closely with the team and with individuals to identify strengths and areas that require improvement. Coaches should get heavily involved in preparing Individual Development Plans (IDP) with each employee and define a mechanism by which they can track the individual’s progress



and failures. Coaches should help the team or individual overcome obstacles or failures. As improvements are demonstrated, have individuals update their IDPs to incorporate new challenges.

Provide Focus

Coaches should define the problems for the team and help them remain focused on those problems. Caution should be taken by coaches, in that they should not try to solve problems for the team while simultaneously describing them. Solutions to team problems are the responsibility of each team and one of the primary reasons for the transition to a teaming environment.

Often teams can get distracted when working on a problem, particularly large problems. Coaches should help teams define their priorities and stick with them.

Be Flexible When Working With Different Teams

Coaches should recognize that no two teams are the same. Different teams will be at different levels of maturity in their teaming development, each requiring a different level of mentoring. Firmly established teams require very little assistance, while newly formed teams might require almost constant support. In either case coaches should take care not to impede their team's progress by overcompensating in their coaching and support. Coaches should remember the critical coaching goal is to increase their team's independence. This can be done only by providing teams the opportunity to solve their own problems – and yes, sometimes make mistakes.

Realize and Minimize Mistakes

Coaches must realize that mistakes will happen. In many cases mistakes can be our best teachers. Coaches must convey trust in their team's competence by allowing teams to do their jobs. When mistakes do occur, coaches must make sure not to place blame, but instead look for what caused the mistake and help their teams avoid the same mistake in the future. Coaches must realize that all tasks undertaken by their teams are re-

ally development tasks, which build team confidence and competence in the performance of their duties. Coaches must also realize that people master tasks in small steps. Coaches can help build their team's competencies by continuously challenging them with problems that increase in difficulty.

Motivate

One of the most critical duties of coaches is to motivate their teams. Often teams will become despondent when difficulties arise. Coaches must motivate their teams by reminding them of past accomplishments. They must also assure their teams that they, the coaches, have the utmost confidence in their team's ability to solve their present dilemmas. Coaches must stress the importance of their team's work and that no one else could do it any better.

The Entrenched —
“I’ll just work harder
and maybe it
will go away.”



In some cases, coaches may have to become more forceful in motivating teams. As for what is meant by being “forceful,” to put it candidly, coaches might “have to kick a few posteriors” by stressing that it is their team's job to work the problem, and they have no choice but to do so. While doing this, coaches must stress that they are there to help solve the problem by removing whatever roadblocks (i.e., organizational, administrative) that may stand in their team's way.

Also, while coaches are providing this forceful motivation, they must also fight against what could be termed, providing “negative motivation.” Criticism can be devastating to team confidence and erase months of progress. Coaches must ensure that teams know that this “forceful motivation” is for their own good. When criticism is necessary, it must be provided in the most constructive manner possible to avoid the possibility of losing their team's respect.

Continually Reevaluate

Coaches must continually reevaluate the strengths and weaknesses of their team to capitalize on strengths and minimize weaknesses. They must meet with individuals to discuss their specific career goals and help them meet those goals. Coaches must also define how individuals can get feedback on their performance. Individuals must be assured that coaches have an open door policy and are always available to talk.

Identify Weak Performers

One of the most difficult tasks will be to identify and help weak performers in an organization. Ideally, in a teaming organization individual team members will help motivate those who are contributing less than their fair share. When poor performers are unresponsive to this internal team motivation, coaches must step in and confront them. If this is not done, poor performers can jeopardize the progress being made by the entire team. After all, if the poor performers can gain the same benefits and rewards as the hard

workers on the team, why should anyone on the team have to work hard?

These poor performers will require extensive mentoring to motivate them to do their fair share. If barriers surface (i.e., training or difficulties at home), coaches must do their best to work with poor performers to overcome any such barriers.

Listen

The most simple and probably most overlooked tool coaches can use to mentor teams is to “listen more and talk less.” As with poor performers, it would be very easy to forcefully motivate them to work harder. This approach, however, would not reveal why they were poor performers and would probably alienate them for good.

Only through listening would coaches be able to identify the underlying barriers poor performers face. Also, teams are more likely to seek the opinions of their coaches if they are sure their coaches will actually listen to what they have to say before responding.

DRIVING ORGANIZATIONAL OBJECTIVES THAT WILL FOCUS TEAM EFFORTS

Efforts by coaches to drive organizational objectives serve two purposes. First, they provide focus for teams by ensuring they know why they are producing a particular product or service. Second, leaving organizational-level efforts for coaches to work frees teams to concentrate on producing their product or service. Efforts by coaches to drive organizational objectives can be divided into four areas:

- Provide link/common frame of reference between the leadership and team.
- Discourage “We vs. They” thinking.
- Build an environment conducive to teamwork.
- Define user requirements.

Coaches must provide a link between the leadership and the team. An organization’s leaders define the vision of the organization; they are the ones who must be made aware of

the accomplishments and progress of their teams toward that vision. Coaches, along with the leaders, must ensure their teams know and support the vision of their organizations. Why? It is the vision that defines the purpose and values of the organization. It fuels the passion of the teams and individuals to keep focused on what they are ultimately trying to achieve. Coaches must be able to communicate to teams the current and future organizational needs and how those needs relate to their team. As with the organizational vision, teams must know why and how their product or service contributes to the overall goals of the organization.

Coaches must also provide an additional link between all of the teams in the organization to ensure that everyone is aware of how all of the organization’s team products or services are being brought together to support the goals of the organization. This communication between teams is also critical to avoid any duplication of effort between teams.

Discourage “We vs. They” thinking. Teaming organizations are based on

teams working toward a common organization vision. Even with that vision, usually an underlying competitiveness exists between teams. In the world of constantly shrinking resources (i.e., funding, facilities, personnel), all teams realize that the success of their team weighs heavily on resources they receive in the future.

A certain amount of competitiveness between teams can be healthy and even improve the quality of the products produced. However, coaches must guard against this competitiveness becoming destructive. When this happens teams can actually start to work against each other, trying to gain more visibility and resources than the other teams. Competitiveness taken too far results in not only failure of the coaches, but also failure of the entire teaming organization concept. Coaches must constantly remind teams of the greater good — that the success of the individual team is a success for everyone.

Build an environment conducive to teamwork. As previously discussed, coaches must ensure that all teams are working toward a common vision. Coaches must try to create an enjoyable work environment for teams. This is necessary since people will be more productive in a comfortable versus uncomfortable work environment. This comfort level is not related to physical comfort per se; it relates to the comfort of the interrelationship between individuals and teams. This camaraderie is critical if teams are meant to work closely together.

The BSer —
“Follow me, everyone! I
know where I’m
going.”



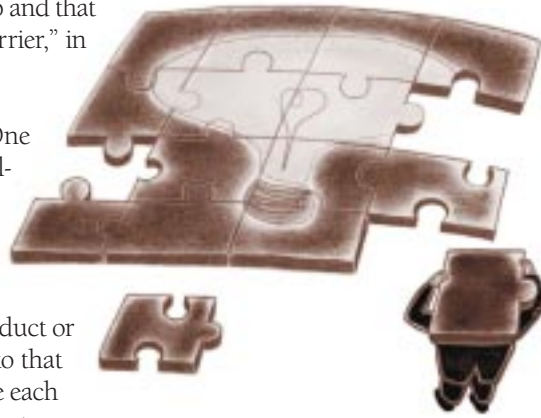
Building this camaraderie can be very simple or difficult, depending on the types of individuals involved. It could be as simple as organizing social functions (perhaps a community lunch held once a month) or by holding joint team meetings to allow the teams to interrelate. More difficult cases may require a greater focus or counseling of an individual or team to ensure they

know they are part of the group and that the saying, "The more the merrier," in this respect, is true.

Define "user" requirements. One of the most critical responsibilities of coaches is to get "users" involved in the teaming process. If at all possible, users should become a part of the team delivering their product or service, or at least counselors to that team. This is important because each team has to know who the customers are and what is required from their team to support the customers. Often users are too busy to participate in the teaming process. When this happens, coaches, along with team leaders and selected representatives of the teams, must go to the users to provide periodic updates, get clarification of issues, and assure users that the team and organization continue to be focused on providing the best product or service possible.

The Most Important Component — Coaching

I stated at the beginning of this article that many of the ex-supervisors at



The Learner — "We Can Do It!"

TARDEC felt that the transition of the organization into a teaming organization "... would reduce, if not remove their authority, leaving them with little to do." This article presents a sound argument that quite the opposite is true: Coaches are, in fact, one of the most critical components in the organization. Their work-

load has increased in quantity and in importance. Their focus has changed from the management of the production of a product or service to the coaching of the people, the most important component of the organization.



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