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Crafting a Coaching Culture

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By Sarah Boehle

Cynical, snooty, abrasive, insensitive. These are just a handful of the words Benoit Vincent uses to describe the kind of leader and manager he used to be. To make matters worse? "I'm French," he says with a chuckle.

A pedigreed engineer with decades of experience, Vincent's education, background, and technical abilities were more than enough to garner the respect he needed to effectively manage the 100-plus engineers and other staffers who report to him in his role as chief technical officer at TaylorMade-adidas Golf (TMaG), a golf equipment and accessories company headquartered in Carlsbad, Calif. Still, his people skills—or lack thereof—had ramifications on the job.

In executive meetings, Vincent tended to whiz through finely detailed technical information, leaving his fellow execs, all of whom lack an engineering background, more baffled than informed. Turnover in his department was commonplace. In fact, his assistant quit because she couldn't handle it anymore. "I talked to her only when I wanted something," he says. "If she was wrong, I'd tell her, and I rarely asked her if she had a good weekend. I never acknowledged her or brought her flowers for Administrative Professionals Day. And rewarding someone was the last thing I'd do." If employees completed a task, he says, "My idea of a reward was to let them keep their job."

To witness Vincent in action at TMaG today, you might be inclined to wonder whether his evil twin was surreptitiously replaced by his better half. No more cynical comments. No ducking difficult conversations. Now he listens to people, many of whom come to him first with their issues, difficulties and concerns, he says, because they feel safe and listened to.

In case you're still wondering, Vincent is neither a twin, nor is he the recipient of the world's first brain transplant. He is a product, rather, of one-on-one workplace coaching.

Approximately four years ago, he began working with an internal certified coach at TMaG. After completing a Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) analysis and Hogan Personal Inventory to help him better understand his shortcomings, strengths, temperament and preferences, he and his coach began meeting once every few months to develop his managerial soft skills. Now in year four of coaching, Vincent meets with his coach twice a month, and the two utilize a set of clearly defined objectives, which they develop together at the beginning of each year. Last year, for example, Vincent created department-wide "crucial conversations" training and tasked the 100-plus engineers in his group with reading chapters of the book by [the same title](#) (by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler, McGraw-Hill in 2002) and gathering every six weeks to discuss how aspects of the book turn up in their daily lives.

As a result of the changes in Vincent and other early adopters in the company, coaching slowly began to take hold throughout TMaG. Today, some 50 out of 55 employees at the director level and above either currently receive or have received one-on-one coaching. Such coaching also is being cascaded down to approximately 45 managers and supervisors below the director-level rank. TMaG's staff of certified internal coaches blossomed over the last four years from one certified coach to eight, with plans in the works to beef up those ranks to 11 certified coaches this year.

The ultimate goal, says David Berry, director of coaching at TMaG, is to create a true coaching culture—not, he says, by creating an internal staff of 400 coaches to provide one-on-one coaching to all 1,200 TMaG employees worldwide, but by building the skills of leaders and managers who do receive one-on-one coaching to, in turn, provide situational "spot" coaching to their reports.

To accomplish that, TMaG puts its leaders and managers through a rigorous leadership development curriculum. "We teach leaders to ask, 'Is this a moment where I need to step in, or is this a coach-able moment where I should step back and give this person a chance to grow and gain self-confidence by asking a few good questions and helping him to come up with a solution on his own?'"

Long reserved for the high-performing C-suite elite—and conversely, for underperformers as a last-ditch,

pre-pink-slip intervention—workplace coaching is rapidly shedding its stigma and emerging from the shadows to become recognized by an increasing number of organizations as an essential tool for addressing workplace issues ranging from rampant turnover and low productivity to lackluster morale.

Earlier this year, the International Coach Federation (ICF), the professional association of personal and business coaches in Lexington, Ky., that accredits coaching schools, released the "ICF Global Coaching Study," which was conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP. The study "conservatively" estimated that there are now 30,000 coaches worldwide and pinpointed current estimated revenue generated by the industry at close to \$1.5 billion (USD).

According to ICF President Kay Cannon, ICF's membership is growing "exponentially." Today, the organization boasts nearly 12,000 members in more than 80 countries (compared to just 2,000 members located throughout North America in 1999). Approximately 200 to 400 new members are added to ICF's membership roster each month, and the number of coaches credentialed by ICF has almost doubled in each of the last three years, from 237 in 2004 to 441 in 2005 and 807 in 2006.

Meanwhile, a separate survey conducted last year by the Institute of Executive Development and Marshall Goldsmith Partners LLC, an executive coaching firm with offices throughout the U.S., predicts the executive coaching industry alone will grow by 10 percent over each of the next three years.

Why are so many organizations turning to coaching now? Many attribute the recent "coaching craze" to the widespread post-recession, post-9/11, post-dot-com-bust tendency of organizations to focus on maximizing productivity—and the bottom line—at all costs, including human capital. Faced with more tasks than time to complete them, managers and supervisors have less bandwidth than ever, they say, to devote themselves to the all-important tasks of leading, managing, and developing their people.

"A lot of research has come out indicating that organizations able to sustain the highest levels of productivity and financial success are those with the most engaged and loyal workforce," says ICF's Cannon, "and coaching, in its truest sense, is one of the most powerful tools for accelerating and individualizing on-the-job development, maximizing individual and team potential, and developing highly engaged employees who are satisfied with and loyal to the company."

"Feel good" benefits aside, at the end of the day, companies primarily turn to coaching because it delivers results. Take Mary Frances Accessories Inc., for example. In January 2006, roughly two months after she arrived on the job, Director of Sales and Customer Service Laurie Cozart—a certified coach who received her own indoctrination into coaching through one-on-one sessions with a coach from Antonio, TX-based executive coaching firm Beyond Point B—and a fellow colleague started to conduct monthly coaching sessions with each employee on staff at the 21-person handbag and accessories company in Lafayette, Calif. Their mission was to not only develop employees and build a winning company, she says, but also to address issues that had plagued the company for years, such as a "high level of employee frustration" over "not being heard" and "excessive turnover."

The sessions—which focus on performance management and include development of individual strategic plans, as well as monthly coaching discussions to chart progress toward goals and solve problems as they arise—are having a profound impact on the organization, says Cozart. Some 16 months after the first coaching session kicked off, for example, "there's a newfound feeling of cohesiveness within the organization," she says, "and people seem to feel they are being heard, and their talents are being utilized and grown." Productivity also increased, customer service improved markedly, and turnover—the company's weightiest albatross by far—decreased 85 percent since the coaching program's inception.

On an informal basis, "coaching buddies" are tasked with making themselves available on the floor to lend support to their peers in times of need and remaining on the lookout for "coach-able" moments as they arise day to day.

Even on a smaller scale, one-on-one coaching interventions can deliver significant results. Last fall, Phoenix-based bread manufacturer Holsum Bakery Inc. hired the Adler School of Professional Coaching-SW LLC in Phoenix, to conduct mandatory "leader as coach" training for executives, frontline supervisors, and positions in between. The training consists of a customized two-day workshop, development of a personalized action plan, and periodic follow-up tele-labs. "There was a need to alter Holsum's stress-driven command/control management style, which was shutting down team members," explains Laura Atwood, president of Adler School of Professional Coaching-SW LLC. "They also needed to develop ways to work across boundaries effectively."

To date, 80 percent of those targeted to receive the training have done so, and the remaining 20 percent are slated to go through the program this summer. Plans also are under consideration to bring the leader as coach program to others in the company such as frontline foremen.

Short-form assessments conducted post training indicate that 78.9 percent of trainees report that their ability to engage and empower has improved somewhat or greatly; 89.5 percent report that their listening ability and communication effectiveness have improved somewhat or greatly; and 84.2 percent of participants report that their capability to develop performance and skills in others increased somewhat or greatly.

Despite such good results, it's often difficult to get people on board the coaching bandwagon. "That was the largest part of the battle," TMaG's Vincent says. "It took us a solid two years before we were able to convince enough people to get the funding we needed to coach everyone at the director-level and above, and we were alone for 18 months of that timeframe."

For TMaG, he says, the tipping point finally came after months of those who weren't enrolled in one-on-one coaching witnessing, day in and day out, the results that their "coached" peers were achieving—a time-consuming process, he says, that takes place not overnight, but one day, one person, and one coaching session at a time.

Sidebar: Tips for Creating a Coaching Culture

Be clear on what you want. Some organizations offer one-on-one coaching only to certain employees. Others take the "leader as coach" approach. Some do both. Still others put coaching cultures in place that include formal one-on-one coaching and top-down situational coaching, plus bottom-up and peer-to-peer coaching. To determine which type of structure is best for your organization, look no further than your organization's business goals, strategy, and needs—as well as the issues coaching is meant to address.

Start at the top. Get execs and senior managers to participate in coaching themselves; then—and only then—roll out the program to the rest of the organization.

Prepare for resistance. Most of those new to both coaching and being coached resist it because they either don't know what coaching is or are uncomfortable transitioning away from more traditional approaches to management. "Coaching is a creative process," says ICF's Kay Cannon. "Most tend to agree it is about listening, not giving advice. It is about providing a forum and venue for people to explore their interests, issues, needs, desires, and challenges—and a place for them to work toward bettering themselves."

Don't make coaching punitive. Don't use "coaching" as a code word for remedial action, recommends Verizon Business Executive Coach Paul Higuchi. Instead, use it to reward and encourage. At Higuchi's company, for example, coaching is cast as a developmental opportunity to increase the effectiveness of high performers. "In other words, you have to be an A or B player to be enrolled," he says.

Coach the whole person; personally and professionally. This requires companies to place trust in both coaches and coachees to move forward with the best interests of the company in mind. "You can spend too much time worrying about talking about a guy's marriage," says TMaG's David Berry. "But I guarantee you that what's going on in the marriage is also going on, to some extent, with his peers and reports. If he has a trusted outlet to go to with his problems, however, he'll be able to focus on work more effectively."