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## Coach the boss!

Coaching techniques don't have to be top-down – even you can bring about change to your bosses as well.

**Experts agree that** coaching is a core characteristic of effective leadership. However, it is generally considered a downward communication approach, from bosses to subordinates. The reality is, the same thinking and approach can be used upward to senior management.

With direct reports, the option to override their decisions always exists. Yet with higher management, that option simply doesn't exist. So, what do you do when you don't agree with the boss?

Everyone knows that their superiors have the ultimate power to demote, fire, promote or give an exceptional, mediocre or poor performance assessment. That power instills a feeling of fear which creates a passive, submissive relationship and may cause some to feel victimised. Victims generally complain, whine, assume a negative attitude and a reactive position. Coaching the boss can be a highly challenging event.

However, the same coaching structure used with direct reports can be applied:

- Establish trust with mutual respect and building the relationship.
- Focus on what motivates the boss and set aside your own concerns.
- Actively listen, ask good questions, clarify, reframe, rethink and offer solutions or suggestions.
- Encourage action.

### Prior to meeting

Before meeting the boss, mentally prepare by:

- Stifling the internal "little voice" that makes you feel like a victim, as this can cause criticisms, grumbling and inadvertently making rash comments without thinking.
- Committing to the boss's success by asking yourself questions like, "What can I do to help my boss?", "How can I make my boss successful?", "What actions can I take to show commitment and support?"
- Mentally putting aside any fears. Place yourself in a position of strength and confidence that allows you to relax, lower the reactive guard and adapt the boss's way of thinking.

### During the meeting

To build and sustain relationships that facilitate effective conversations – establish the following key elements:

- **Presence** – Be committed to being "present and attentive". Establishing and maintaining "presence" is a unique and powerful trait accomplished with the following:
- **Clearing space** – Having "presence" means being there in mind, body and spirit. Prior to the meeting, mentally prepare by centering on the boss and the meeting. Sweep out personal issues, gains clarity on intentions, purpose and goals by thinking through and writing down goals prior to the meeting.



Just don't forget who's boss.

- **Focus** – Concentrate on the boss's concerns, motivations and particular needs. Set aside any personal concerns while seeking to identify a commonality of thinking and purpose. Actively listen to what is being said and observe non-verbal clues to what is *not* said. Establish presence by focusing on the boss with committed listening – no matter how disgruntled, unhappy or upset the boss may be. Demonstrate by your words and actions that a genuine commitment exists.
- **Flexibility** – During conversations shifting is necessary. Maintaining flexibility is essential to establishing presence at a deeper level. It is a unique ability to intuitively sense, adapt and alter direction as required.
- **Respect** – The objective is not to immediately launch into speaking without some sort of warning. Do remember to seek "permission" to ask a question about a particular topic or begin a conversation as this immediately establishes a level of "respect" that leads to "trust".

Some factors can also help in building a relationship with your boss:

- **Rapport** – Rapport is not about agreement. You can diplomatically disagree and still have rapport. It is your ability to understand and relate to the other person's world in terms of their values, beliefs and perceptions. It is not only about being liked, although that is an advantage. Rapport is essential to establishing trust, constructively influencing others thinking and transforming behaviors.
- **Empathy** – Empathy is about relating to the other person's situation (and feelings) in a non-judgmental way. If the boss truly feels you understand their situation, the relationship deepens, they open up and respond positively.
- **Mirroring** – Mirroring the body language of others is an easy and natural way to establish a relationship. Focus on the boss's agenda, mirror body rhythms, language, gestures, voice tone, pauses, pace and speed.

Use curiosity and intuition to better understand the boss's thinking by asking powerful questions. Seek out areas where common thinking overlaps, as this connection allows you to positively influence the boss according to your agenda.

Actively listen to the boss's answers to gain a clear understanding of how to provide the highest level of support. The more connections identified, the more opportunities to influence the boss's thinking. The source and strength of your influence originates from your knowledge, competencies and understanding of the boss's perspective and thinking.

### Encourage action

Your coaching helps the boss formulate the next steps. To facilitate the boss's thinking, you can suggest additional meetings, or other actions the boss may not have considered. 