



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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Thinking about Coaching

By Jennifer Fleck

As I'm writing this, spring is just now really starting here in Maine. There is new growth everywhere I look outside. It makes me wonder if there is also new growth happening inside my office. Am I growing my skills? Is my team continuing to grow their skills, both as individuals and as a team? This growth won't just happen because it is warmer outside, though. While we each are the owners of our individual careers, it takes a coach to foster that growth and make the team come together.

To begin my quest to become a better coach, I went to getAbstract, a free service for Management and Personal Development (MPD) Section members.¹ When I typed "coaching" in the search box, I was given 491 book summaries to choose from. There is no shortage of people looking to teach us to coach. To focus the results a bit, I went to the "Knowledge Packs" that getAbstract offers and downloaded the Coaching Knowledge Pack. There I found a broad overview of four different coaching books.

The most useful of the four books to me was *The Extraordinary Coach: How the Best Leaders Help Others Grow*, by John H. Zenger and Kathleen Stinnett. This book first lays out the significant benefits of coaching, which include things like signaling to your employees that their company and their supervisors value them, making people more enthusiastic about work, increased productivity, stronger culture, healthier individuals by boosting self-esteem and morale, more resilience, heightened creativity, increased risk-taking, and a mindset of an owner versus a hired hand.

After a lead-up like that, you might ask why everyone isn't coaching. This book takes you through some excuses for not coaching, and then through some ways that managers coach badly. The authors suggest sessions that many managers regard as coaching prove to be nothing more than project-review meetings. Coaches shouldn't try to solve problems immediately, and they shouldn't offer advice.



So what makes a good coach? Zenger and Stinnett outline the following duties that a superior coach performs:

- Build a strong relationship.
- Communicate effectively—ask open-ended questions to help your employees gain perspective and personal awareness.
- Facilitate action and results—guide staff to solve their own problems and encourage them to innovate.
- Provide ongoing support.

They use the FUEL Coaching Framework. This is a four-stage system to structure your coaching. During each stage, the employee should be doing the majority of the talking.

1. Frame the Conversation—Identify issues; get goals for the conversation; secure agreement on the process; ensure the employee selects the topics.
2. Understand the Current State—Establish the employee's point of view; discuss consequences



Jennifer Fleck, FSA, MAAA, is chairperson of the Management & Personal Development Section and AVP—Large Case Actuary at Unum in Portland, Maine. She can be contacted at jfleck@unum.com.

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- of not changing the current state; discuss the coach's view, but delicately.
3. Explore the Desired State—Discuss options and potential roadblocks. The employee needs to develop their own solution. Never settle for the first solution they come up with. The coach should ask questions, but not give directions.
 4. Lay Out a Success Plan—Develop a plan; set a timeline; set milestones.

Another book in the Knowledge Pack was *Coach Anyone About Anything, Volume 2: How to Empower Leaders and High-Performing Teams*, by Germaine Porché and Jed Niederer. This book summary didn't have as much information that I could apply to my own circumstances, but it did emphasize a key theme that coaches are there to ask questions and bring the client to their own conclusion. They made the distinction that mentors tend to tell, while coaches ask. This book, along with the other two that I discuss below, seems to be more directed at professional coaches instead of managers looking to coach their own employees and teams.

Coaching for Performance: Growing Human Potential and Purpose, by John Whitmore, also emphasized the importance of the coach asking questions to guide the client to solve their own problems. He discussed the GROW formula, which

sounded very similar to the FUEL framework above.

1. Goal setting.
2. Reality checking—Be objective about what you want to accomplish; how much of it is in your control?
3. Options—create lists of options and examine the pros and cons of each one.
4. What is to be done? When? And by whom?

Finally, *Coaching the Team at Work*, by David Clutterbuck, addressed the topic of coaching teams instead of individuals. The perspective here was from a coach who was brought in to help a specific team with their goals. In this situation the coach isn't the manager. The team is defined as a small number of people who share goals and depend on one another to reach them. Again, the focus is on asking questions. The coach also helps each person examine his or her relationship with the other team members, with the job, and with specific tasks. The coach's role is to guide the team to produce solid decisions that have members' backing and commitment. The coach needs to communicate with management to ensure that the correct goals are being addressed.

While each book had different tips that I could glean from the summaries, Zenger and Stinnett's book clearly was most fitting to my situation. Having the getAbstract summaries and Knowledge Pack saved me quite a bit of time. I didn't need to read each book to determine if it had what I was looking for. As I go deeper on this topic, I may pick up the actual books to read some more of their details and get some more sample questions to ask my team.

When you find yourself thinking about some new topic that you want to learn about, put your section subscription to getAbstract to work. You can either search for a book directly, or download a few of the Knowledge Packs. Doing a quick scan of the list I see such varied topics as Leadership Strategies, Restructuring, Consumer Behavior, Tax Havens, Six Sigma, Jerks at Work, Terrorism, the



Oil Industry, and Physics. Print out a few before your next plane ride, and arrive smarter than when you left!

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ENDNOTE

¹ See the end of this article for more details on how to take advantage of this service.

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