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# Cascading Coaching

## Building a Culture of Peer Development

By David Hosmer

“Yes, Karen, I would be honored to be your coach, under one condition.” Karen sat upright, fully attentive, and waited. “Okay.” She replied. I continued, “...that you will coach another member of your team as I coach you. And your coachee will in turn do the same for another member of the team.” Karen accepted the challenge without hesitation. I explained, “We are cascading coaching into the culture of our division. We will be role models for what it looks and feels like to be effective coaches.”

Is this another pyramid selling scheme? No, it is Cascading Coaching, a new concept born out of a passion for developing others and teaching others to do the same; and from a realization that managers don’t have enough time to do it all. Its benefits have the potential to be felt far into the organization.

### The Origin of the Model

During the 1990s, I worked at a large electrical company where I facilitated organization design teams. These ad hoc teams were formed to review all aspects of their organizations and make recommendations for change. The organizations for review were large in scope, and included the Information Systems, Human Resources, and Sales & Marketing Divisions. The analysis involved a thorough review of each division’s people, process, systems, structure, vision, strategy, culture, and rewards. The teams spent several months researching, analyzing, and ultimately proposing recommendations for

dramatic change to a Steering Committee for their review and approval.

Members of one such design team were especially enthused with their own experiences working together. They had never worked on a team before where they felt such a sense of accomplishment and experienced healthy dynamics. Eventually, the team accomplished its goal. Their recommendations were accepted, and they received a team bonus award for their work. Subsequently, I facilitated similar teams that experienced similar successes.

In this paternal, hierarchal, monopoly company, employees wanted a participative style of management and more opportunity to work within teams. However, they had little knowledge about how to work within such a framework. Since that time, I have wondered how I could replicate similar gratifying and productive collaborative experiences throughout an organization. The challenge, in my mind, was deciding how to influence a cultural transition from facilitator-led to employee-led learning experiences, that is, without me being the sole facilitator.

Now, in 2006, as a coach and mentor I frequently hear the following such comments. One of my coachees, after surpassing his own set goals remarked, “I can’t believe what I’ve accomplished.” “How did you do it?” I asked. “Having someone ask the right questions, serve as a sounding board, and hold me accountable,” he responded. Other coachees have expressed similar satisfaction as their unexpected abilities unfurl and they manage intensely dynamic work situations

more effectively. They credit their newfound abilities to their coaching experiences.

Based on this kind of experience, I asked myself: “How can I multiply this coach-coachee experience so that others will benefit, without me having to be the only coach? How might I assist motivated employees to fulfill their aspiration to be ‘coach-like,’ even though they lacked professional coaching expertise?”

My solution is a form of peer coaching that I call “Cascading Coaching.” I have been experimenting with the model of Cascading Coaching for the last two years, and more recently, I have been facilitating it as a system within my training department. It is both simple and powerful.

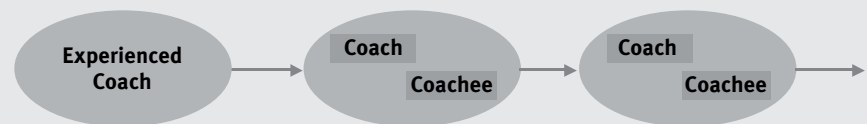
The primary intent of Cascading Coaching is to build a supportive employee-centric culture of peer learning that facilitates professional development, enhanced performance, and improved interpersonal communication. Cascading Coaching provides a framework in which employees can gain insights about how to work more effectively with each other, and how to accelerate their professional development. My hope is that, as the benefits from such improved professional relationships accumulate, they will lead to higher individual performance as well as further develop individuals’ ability to coach others.

There are three stages of development that are part of this system. The first stage, which is currently underway, is to introduce the concept and gain momentum for the use of Cascading Coaching. The second stage involves further developing coaches’ competency levels and strengthening the system by providing educational workshops that focus on more advanced skills, knowledge, and practice. The third stage seeks to leverage the success of the model by replicating it in other areas of the company. Because Cascading Coaching is an evolving model this article concentrates on the first stage of its development.

## The Cascading Coaching System

I coach many individuals in my full time

FIGURE 1:



role as a director of training in a large biotechnology company. Additionally, I have similar relationships outside the company with colleagues, acquaintances and others who have requested coaching or mentoring. For some, I do not charge a monetary fee. Instead, I make a request to the individual that they coach another person in their lives who would benefit from such a focused relationship. Typically, I don’t mention any specific length of time or specific rules. Instead, I encourage people to use their instincts and any approaches that I have used with them, as their coach, that have had a positive impact on their lives.

What do I mean when I use the term “coaching”? Currently, it seems that coaching is defined and practiced in a variety of ways. Some coaches provide advice. Others coach by showing and explaining, while others ask open-ended questions to get the coachee to think differently, which leads to breaking old patterns of behavior.

The International Coaching Federation defines a coaching relationship as, “... an ongoing partnership designed to help clients produce fulfilling results in their personal and professional lives. Coaches help people improve their performances and enhance the quality of their lives. Coaches are trained to listen, to observe and to customize their approach to individual client needs. They seek to elicit solutions and strategies from the client; they believe the client is naturally creative and resourceful. The coach’s job is to provide support to enhance the skills, resources, and creativity that the client already has.” Life coaching, as an example, typically involves a partnership that may deal with all aspects – professional and personal – of a coachee’s life.

While many *professional* life coaches possess specific experience, skills, and knowledge, supported by relevant education and training, the Cascading Coaching system, as it unfolds in an organization, does not require aspiring

coaches to have such credentials. However, Cascading Coaching should be guided by an experienced coach to infuse the system with ethical principles and expertise. This allows new coaches to develop initial skills by observing and emulating a role model, that influences the quality and consistency of coaching behavior over time. Additional training for coaches, the focus of Stage 2 of the Cascading Coaching model, would further refine and accelerate coaches’ skill development and increase the value of peer coaching experience.

As an experienced coach, I employ specific tools and techniques to create the system at the front end, anchored by the following set of basic principles.

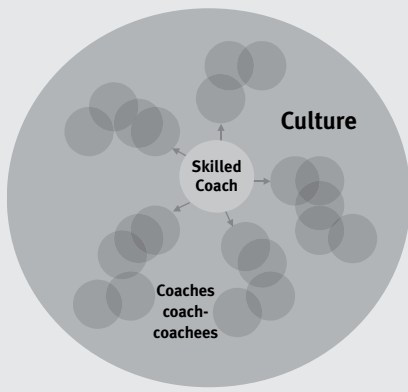
### » Build Trust

The coach-coachee relationship is founded and developed on trust. Coaching sessions are sacred territory, especially in the workplace where politics and human dynamics are often volatile and confusing. Coachees typically share confidential stories, issues, and other important information that they are likely not going to share with anyone else at work. The coach must respect this and hold true to the oath of never sharing the contents of coaching discussions. To do otherwise is unprofessional, and could be devastating to the relationship and the idea of coaching.

### » Hold True to Coachee’s Agenda

The exclusive focus of a coaching session is on the coachee’s agenda. That is, the coachee decides what they want to spend the time discussing and working on during the coaching hour. As with any meeting agenda, there should be a purpose and a goal. The coachee decides what these should be. The coach’s role is to hold true the agenda, by encouraging focus on this during the session. However, there is one caveat for coaching in a work setting. The agenda should

FIGURE 2:



be focused on topics that increase the individual's ability to perform at their highest potential at work, not primarily on personal issues outside the business context, such as family or financial issues. Having said this, I do understand, as a professional coach, that inevitably the two might be entwined.

» **Ask Motivating Questions**

Coaches ask thought provoking questions to motivate the coachee to ponder, internalize, and respond. Asking open-ended questions is the key in getting a coachee to think differently about their challenges. Thoughtful questions afford coachees the ability to see new possibilities and new solutions that they might not otherwise have considered without the posed questions.

Coaches do not usually offer advice. However, it may be appropriate to provide relevant sources, approaches, and other information if aligned with the coachee's agenda.

» **Practice Open-minded Listening**

After asking an open-ended question, the coach's role is to listen. It is important to give the coachee time and space to reflect on the question and to reach into one's inner self for answers and new possibilities. This is important for another reason. By allowing the coachee to come up with their own solutions, there is buy-in and motivation to act. By listening, the coach allows the coachee to hear their own words aloud thereby reinforcing or choosing to adjust them. This fosters

independent thinking so that the coachee ultimately develops their own ability to resolve issues without reliance on the coach for the long term.

A coaching session is typically one hour in length, and longer is not necessarily better. Even though time in the business world is limited, significant coaching work can be accomplished in shorter meetings as well. This can occur over a casual cup of coffee or in an office free of distractions.

**Building a Coaching Culture**

While the term "cascade" connotes a downward direction, in this model new coaching opportunities are not limited by position or title. In fact, here they represent the antithesis of hierarchy. Thus, a peer may serve as a coach to a peer.

The model is intended to be repeatable as the coachee-becomes-coach. Within one year, new coaching relationships in my central training unit materialized because of caring, motivated supervisors and employees who experienced the benefits of Cascading Coaching and held true to their promises to coach others.

As momentum developed, a supportive coaching culture began to form. Currently, coachees' agendas in my department tend to focus on improving interpersonal skills, including communication, assertiveness, conflict resolution, and presentation skills. Coaches benefit, too, by learning coaching skills as coachees themselves. As the experienced coach, I am able to introduce new skills, knowledge, and techniques, by example. This influences the culture over weeks and

months. As coaches have more experience being coached themselves, they tend to use more deliberate approaches as coaches. Specifically, they begin to employ the same thought-provoking questions that they experience as coachees.

What visible effect does Cascading Coaching have on behavior and performance? As might be expected, when I ask the coaches, the answers vary by individual. Nevertheless, the reported results are profound in some cases. One coachee was described by his coach as having a new attitude, evidenced by increased self-confidence. "He doesn't give up like he used to. His motivational level is higher. He takes a task to completion, which is not what he did before."

Another coach also saw his coachee as having more confidence evidenced by less reliance on his coach to provide direction and advice. "He takes more risks." He explained. "Because of past, poor supervisory experiences, his confidence level was very low. I provided him with positive feedback and encouragement."

Why does Cascading Coaching appear to work? Perhaps another way to ask the question is, what do coachees want? Those who respond positively to coaching want a trusting relationship in which someone listens, truly listens, and they want appreciation as well.

**The Benefits of Cascading Coaching**

The potential benefits of Cascading Coaching, assessed informally, include increased employee morale, better retention rates, improved performance, and support for recruiting, since employees

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want to work for managers who value employee development and empowerment.

Additionally, Cascading Coaching provides a process for supporting employee development plans. Many companies require managers to create employee professional development plans that focus on skill and knowledge gaps. Development plans can also serve as tools for preparing employees for their next career move within the company.

However, despite good intentions, many of these are merely plans on paper, not effectively implemented in reality. Often employee development plans focus on seminars, workshops, and conferences as easy solutions for employee development. Unfortunately, these options do not always promote effective employee development. Individual coaching sessions thus represent a prime opportunity to address coachees' developmental needs and bring their plans to fruition.

According to a 2004 study by The Center for Creative Leadership, in a sample of 3,417 participants, 64% of employees surveyed indicated that they wanted to learn "soft skills" through one-on-one coaching. Examples of "soft skills" included leadership, communication, conflict management, coaching, teambuilding, and self-awareness. In addition, 88% of these respondents also preferred face-face-coaching sessions.

In my experience, coaching empowers. Unfortunately, managers seem to be least comfortable using "soft skills," such as coaching and feedback, despite their regular inclusion in management development programs.

What, then, is required for Cascading Coaching to be successful as a development strategy? Managers who feel they need to have control are not likely to be comfortable with this approach. Leaders, however, who are willing to let go and empower others are likely to reap the benefits of the Cascading Coaching model. While there seems to be little risk in this approach, it does require time, although no more than a typical one-on-one meeting with a supervisor.

Cascading Coaching requires someone leading the process who supports the

approach and already has substantial coaching experience and skills. Because coaching is an essential competency for a managerial role, most organizations should have many members of its management ranks equipped to support this model.

Unlike structured mentoring programs, for which I have great respect, Cascading Coaching does not require a formal matching process, database, or other forms of structure to implement. In an environment in which learning is valued and supported, coaches and coachees find each other. While a Cascading Coaching system could supplement or replace mentoring programs, fortunately it need not be considered a "one or the other" option.

However, it is important not to be misled. This approach to coaching is not for everyone. Relationships must be mutually agreeable, and a formal verbal agreement should be negotiated between the individuals in the relationship, to determine how often they will meet and what they will discuss. Such agreements will reflect the needs and expectations of the people involved. Most importantly, the coach-coachee relationships are completely voluntary.

Even though Cascading Coaching is in the early stages of its evolution, it shows great promise, based on anecdotal reports of increased employee confidence, performance, and skill levels. It potentially offers a no-cost solution for developing what are notoriously difficult competencies to learn, such as influence and communication skills. I have seen many technically competent employees who are promoted into supervisory or management roles without the skill, confidence, and ability to coach employees, and yet, coaching is what employees want. This model offers a practical, relevant approach to acquiring these critical skills, especially for companies who wish to foster a culture of employee empowerment, support, and interaction.

I am currently exploring options for developing Stage Two of this evolving system. This stage is designed to offer new coaches some formal, structured training

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to help them develop and practice specific coaching skills. At a minimum, it will comprise brief training modules spread over several weeks to periodically introduce new skills and knowledge into the system. Stage Three, replicating the model elsewhere in the company, will begin when pockets of interest in the concept begin to emerge.

In the model of coaching described here, there is much to gain with relatively little cost, and I hope that you might benefit from my experience. In return for taking the time to share it with you, I have one request. Will you share this article with others whom you believe will benefit from it?

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