

Soft Coaching Running Meetings Part 2

Michael Auzenne: Welcome to "Manager Tools."

[background music]

Mark Horstman: "Soft Coaching -- Running Meetings, Part 2," here we go. This cast answers these questions, how do I help someone improve without the coaching model? What if I need more than feedback but less than coaching? Is it OK to give lots of feedback at one time? Well, if you want answers to these questions and more, keep listening.

Woman: Communication skills. It's one of those things that's really easy to overlook since we do it all the time. I mean, how bad can you be? You are literally practicing constantly. People seek help less often on communication unless they know that they're struggling.

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Michael: Last week, Mark, we talked about what is soft coaching, in particular, right? Something a little bit more than feedback, but not the full-blown coaching model. Folks, if you're interested in the full coaching model, please, we have plenty of podcasts on that. Feel free to go listen to those.

Then we talked about getting soft coaching agreements from our directs. Now, we'll talking about the next thing on our list, is no need for goal-setting and brainstorming. This is a significant departure from the full, full-on coaching model.

Mark: Yeah. Just for those people who may be joining this week, I was in Palo Alto this week delivering a public conference, which I don't think I had done in five years. We had some new listeners, and I asked them how they learned about us. One guy did say, "If I join a four-part thing in the middle, I'm a little confused."

If you're just joining us, if you're wondering what soft coaching is, basically our soft coaching guidance means giving relatively high levels of feedback to one of your directs over a fairly short period of time -- not days, but maybe weeks -- to help them improve in a specific area.

It's an intermittent step, or an in between step between feedback, which you do with all of your directs, positive and negative. I actually shouldn't say that, Mike. Coaching is a goal-directed, self-development effort by one of your directs that lasts usually three months.

It's intensive because you're probably going to be talking about it every week, and there are tasks, and deadlines involved. You'll have to listen to our coaching guidance. To give you an idea, you can do it all in five minutes a week. It's that easy.

Most managers just make some fundamentally bad assumptions about coaching. My guess is you're probably one of them, no offense, so was I, so was Mike. Coaching is for something that'll take more than just a little bit of additional attention for a few weeks.

If you just think you need a little bit of attention for a few weeks, then that's what soft coaching is for. We could also call this focused feedback, meaning, "Hey, for the next few weeks, I'm going to give you focused feedback in this one area."

We decided to call it soft coaching because I told somebody about focused feedback, and he says, "Ooh, that sounds bad." I'm like, "Jeez." We don't need goal setting. We don't need brainstorming. Brainstorming, you generally don't need brainstorming for something that's only going to last a couple of weeks.

Brainstorming is for generating lots of ideas that's going to last. We might use 5, 6, 7, 8, 10 different resources in our coaching model, but we don't need that here. We did gain agreement, but it doesn't require that 15-minute upfront investment that coaching does.

Part of the reason for doing that is we know for many of you, having to sit down with your direct -- even when we spelled it out, how to set a goal, how to brainstorm -- for many managers, the moment you say that with somebody, you're committing to three or four months of talking to them almost every week about their performance in a particular area. It creates the opportunity for failure.

I think one of the underlying principles that most managers have is, "Let's not set goals because if I don't have goals, if I don't have numeric targets, if I don't meet them, I can't be punished for them." That's true for a lot of managers in their overall job, not just in their relationship with an individual direct.

We understand that there's some risk of failure if you sit down with a direct and say, "OK, in four months, you're going to be able to do X," particularly if you've never done coaching before. With soft coaching, there's no risk of failing against a goal. There isn't a goal. There's only improvement.

Always be careful of somebody who says, "The goal is to improve," because that's not a goal. That's a measure of incremental progress. What we're trying to do is use feedback to drive some improvement in behavior -- more good, less bad behavior on the part of the direct. It's going to be in a specific area.

In this particular cast, I think we're talking about running meetings, and we'll do other soft coaching examples where we talk about different things. You're going to give them more positive and negative feedback.

Probably in general, you'd hope that in the beginning, maybe it's 80/20 negative feedback to positive. By the end, it's 90/10 positive to negative, which would be pretty great, I think, for a direct to sense that over time that they're gradually getting rid of their weaknesses and maximizing their strengths.

Michael: Yeah, everybody likes that. Does that mean though that we're not using additional resources like we do in coaching?

Mark: Well, we're not.

[laughter]

Michael: OK, we're not. That's true.

Mark: In the coaching model, you're right. You and your direct identify a bunch of different resources, do the brainstorming that the direct could avail themselves of to help them improve -- books, training, mentors, volunteering, special projects, specific assignments, task delegation, classes, podcasts, online education, coding camps, feedback, video, peer input, etc., etc., etc.

Mike, I'll make a bet with you that in the next three or four months when on the road, somebody's going to come up to you and say, "Hey, that little bit you put in about soft coaching, where you listed some of the brainstorm things that you've come up with in coaching, that was really helpful for my future coaching engagements."

Of course, folks, if you're a licensee, you can download the show notes and just copy that list into your next coaching model template.

Michael: I have a note-taking app, Notational Velocity, for you geeks. [laughs] That's what I use. Regardless, I have in there a note that just has a list. It must have, probably at this point, 60 coaching resources that I can use. When I go to a coaching engagement with one of my directs, I refer to that list of 60 during the brainstorming session.

Now frankly as a manager, I'm not the first one to suggest them. When there's a lull in the brainstorming, I'll throw some of them out there. I just use it over and over and over again. Very useful [laughs] to have those, by the way, folks.

Mark: There are many paths to enlightenment, just like there are many people in your life. Most managers think, I'm going to coach them using tools that make sense to me. Well, of course it's not about you. It's about them. Yeah, that's good. Always helpful.

When I'm on the road, I offer people all the time, "Hey, look. If you need to coach somebody and you're not really sure how to do it in a particular area, email us." If you're a licensee, email us. I'll give you my list. I've coached a person on that before. It's not hard. You need all that stuff if you're doing a three to six-month project.

You want it on the front end. You don't want to be running out of resources, or essentially using up a resource by going to an online class in a weekend, then going, "OK, what do I do now?" You want to be able to go back to a previously thought of list.

When you talk about soft coaching, the how that happens and the improvement with soft coaching doesn't need to be planned each time. The only real tool in the joint effort between you and your direct -- helping your direct improve -- is their behavior and your feedback to them on their behavior.

The assumption -- and by the way, this assumption is pretty well proven in HR, human development, human performance arenas -- is that the attention and measurement of feedback causes performance improvements without requiring a plan, or a gap analysis, or resource planning, or even budgeting.

You just don't need that stuff if you think you can see a relatively straightforward path over a short period of time. When I say short, I mean weeks, not months, to get your direct from where they are to where they need to be. Now that said, there's nothing wrong with the direct saying, "Yeah, I'd kind of like to supplement feedback here with some self-development stuff."

They might say, "Hey, do you know a book?" "Yeah, I know a book." [laughs] "I got books." Again folks, if you need a book recommendation, if you're a licensee, email me. Happy to do it. Now, you wouldn't then say, "Hey, here's..." When the direct says, "I'd kind of like to read about this."

OK, good. You wouldn't then sit down and go, "Let's come up with a plan for you reading the book." If they're motivated to read a book and they suggest it, recommend a book. Don't track whether or not they read the book.

Because in fact, if they read the book and are successful in reading the book, but their behavior is not changing, that's a distraction from them focusing on the behavior. There's nothing wrong. Some people would say, "I'd really rather spend a couple of months studying the problem." Often, these are for those of you who are just people.

These are high C's. These are folks who say, "No, I don't want to run that risk of having to change my behavior until I've come up with a plan in my mind, or thought it through, or talked to somebody else who's known all the options." and so on.

Michael: They wouldn't say, "Talk to somebody else," too. They wouldn't say... [laughs]

Mark: Well, no. When I say talk to somebody else, I mean talk to an expert. There's nothing wrong with that per se. Now, somebody who you say, "Look, I really need to help you with meeting deadlines." They say, "I'm uncomfortable with the soft coaching approach. Can I have six months to study deadline management, and tracking software, and task management processes?" and then the answer is, yeah, no.

You can't delay for six months because you're going to study and beat it to death with knowledge. A path that's both of them where the direct says, "I'd kind of like to supplement this," and I think that's a good word to use -- supplement.

In other words, the primary thing is going to be me assigning work, you doing it, and me paying attention, and giving you plenty of feedback about it. Then the other thing could be, yeah, read books, go to classes. Those are all good.

Michael: Like online courses, maybe?

Mark: Yeah, absolutely. Why not? Again, I wouldn't track their performance in that online course.

Michael: Right, just like you wouldn't track the reading of the book. How about things that are more involved that I think of as, I don't know, longer-term engage...I think of the full coaching model when I think about things like Toastmasters. Could Toastmasters apply here as well?

Mark: It could. I mean, look, if you've got a direct who said, "Yep, I'd love it, and I'd like to do a little bit more," and we recognize the first thing we have to do is get all of our work done. Yeah, if they want to do more, I would. If you were boss, Mike, and you said, "Yeah, I think you got an area here where you need to get better," I'd be like, "OK."

Remember guys, by the way, there's two classic reasons why you coach someone. One, the one that springs to everyone's mind is that in some area that they are measured in, they are below standard. They're below the minimum. They're at risk, their performance in that area makes them at risk more broadly. That's classic, right, and that's why coaching has a negative stigma.

The other one is a performer who's doing fine, perhaps better than fine, perhaps even outstanding, but needs yet more in order to go to the next level, to expand their repertoire, to just develop themselves generally, to be considered for a different position somewhere else, or a classic example of self-improvement and professional development.

Either one of those things can be true. Why would you want to say, "Oh, no, it's soft coaching. No, we can't use any additional resources."? If the direct says, "Gosh, this is important to me," I'm willing to do it, so yeah. Again, no, if you're talking about Toastmasters, you don't expect biweekly updates, track whether or not they're going, how many ums and ahs they've given in speeches and so on.

That's not to say you can't ask every couple of weeks, "Hey, how's the Toastmasters going? Is it fun? Is it good? Good people in the group?" Now, that's not measurement. That's care and concern for your direct.

Michael: Yeah. Regardless of whether it's coaching or soft coaching, if my direct asks me [laughs] or suggest that they want to go to Toastmasters, I would absolutely encourage them to do so. I can't imagine saying, "No, don't do that. That's a waste of time."

Mark: Yeah, don't do that.

[crosstalk]

Michael: That's crazy talk.

Mark: Yeah. I think we've said before, Toastmasters may be, at least for me, the best quasi-professional association that I know of. You mentioned you absolutely encourage it. I'd pay for it. Like, "No, here. Go. I'll pay your dues, go."

Michael: Absolutely. We've talked about that, right, which is suggest tasks and then give tons of feedback. That's the heart of the coaching model.

Mark: Yeah. It's the heart of the soft coaching, right?

Michael: Yeah.

Mark: Look, we've taken too long to get here. I apologize. We're filling in back fill so people can understand where soft coaching fits in, in a [laughs] pantheon of manager tools guidance. By the way, I mentioned Palo Alto, Mike. I heard from several people, "There's just so much stuff out there."

Michael: Yeah, where do I start?

Mark: Oh, jeez. "I feel terrible." OK, good, then I can stop writing podcasts. There's too much. The heart of the model is to suggest tasks your direct can do, that you feel like you can give them feedback on. We're focusing on one specific activity between manager and direct, and that is essentially targeted feedback.

Let's get right to it. How would it sound? I might say, "OK, look, glad we've agreed about running meetings. Here's a good way to start. Let's have you run the next staff meeting. I'll watch you, and I'll give you feedback either later that day or on our one-on-one the following day." Direct goes, "OK."

During the staff meeting, you make notes about things that go well and things that don't. Now, I'm going to make another aside here. I'm going to say this for probably the 10th time, which is not enough. When I say it to people, their eyes kind of open up.

Folks, if your meetings don't start on time and end on time, are efficient and crisp, and when you have guests come in, don't go, "Wow, you know how to run a meeting," you are absolutely underperforming this standard. If you're listening to this podcast, you are capable of running a tick tale meeting, seriously awesome meeting.

Some of it is you don't know how, and that's fine. I'll tell you another underlying reason. When you're running a meeting, let's say your staff meeting or a project meeting, there are three things you're probably doing. Number one, you're running and facilitating the meeting.

Number two, you're probably wanting to provide content to the topics that are on the agenda, whatever suffices the agenda, which is probably in your head. No wonder people can't follow it.

The third thing is you're paying attention to how people on the team interact. Who trusts who, who listens to who, who interrupts who, who's a little jerk and sits in the corner, whispers, complains and so on. Three things. Now, the first thing -- running a meeting -- a monkey could run a meeting.

Of the three things, the one that's least important, the one that's most likely given to somebody else, the one that is least valuable is running the meeting. When you start delegating, when you teach other people to run meetings after you've mastered, which will only take you six weeks.

After you've done that, you will then need to focus on the two most important things, which is providing content and watching how your team interacts with one another. You will be able to do it in a massive sense of calm.

The idea that we have managers all over the world still running meetings, running them poorly and haven't figured out this is a classic case for delegation. In fact, you don't really like running meetings, because there's some stuff you got to do, and you never have time to create and agenda.

Even though we have a podcast about how to create a quick agenda in two minutes or take notes, which is also super easy. There's a podcast about that. Whether we've made it easy or not doesn't matter. If you think it's hard and you haven't proven, and all we have to do is look at your behavior to tell.

If you haven't proven that you're interested in mastering it, give it to one of your directs, who will see it as you tapping them on the shoulder and saying, "I think you're capable of doing more." If you're a manager, that's how you felt when you weren't a manager. You wanted people to recognize that you felt you were capable of doing more.

Let's take advantage of that. I don't mean advantage in the negative sense. Let's honor the people who want to grow and develop, because professional growth and development is the engine or productivity, which is the engine of profitability in your firm.

We're going to assign the task. Then we're going to pay attention to the direct. During the staff meeting, we're going to make notes about things that go well and things that don't. It's really simple. During the follow-up discussion, maybe the next day, maybe you just hold them back at the end of the meeting. Maybe you do it two days later in their one-on-one. It doesn't matter terribly.

Don't do it a week later, more than a week later, because your memory will be bad. Basically, what you do is use our event-based feedback model to give a bunch of feedback. There's a cast [laughs] for that called "Event-Based Feedback," where you can get a lot more examples.

The key to event-based feedback is you ask one time about giving feedback about an event where there might be multiple infractions or successes. Then you just do lots of when [inaudible 18:52] what. Sound like this, "Dude, can you give me some feedback?"

"When you start the meeting on time, that's good. Well done. When you don't send out an agenda, folks don't know how much time they have. That's not good. Can you work on that? When you put the agenda on the first slide, the agenda goes away when you move to the next slide.

"Can you post it or send it out next time? That'd be good. When you take 10 more minutes on the first agenda item than you had planned for, it makes getting the meeting done on time much harder. Can you pay more attention to the clock for agenda item? When you shush Bob when he interrupts Miguel, that's good enforcement of the ground rules. We all agree to that. Good work there."

I know that sounds really mundane, but it's really good.

Michael: Yeah, those are all behaviors associated with running good meetings.

Mark: Do more of this stuff and less of that stuff, and pretty soon you won't be doing any stuff that gets in the way. People are going to go, "Wow, how did you learn to do that?" "I got soft coached using a lot of feedback." If you'll notice, the tasks we assigned here is an activity related to the performance rather than a learning task or preparatory task. They're performance tasks, right?

In the coaching model where we think it'll take a little bit heavier lifting, something more significant, they may have to do some learning. They may have to do some personal development in order to prepare for the performance task that we're going to measure. In this case, in soft coaching, you just assign the tasks. It's just like getting reps. It's just like getting more reps, that's all.

Michael: Right. The task is not, "Read a book about lifting the weights." It's, "Lift the weights, and then I'll watch you and give you some feedback."

Mark: Yeah, exactly. Again though, if the direct wants to study, or learn, or prepare, that's great. Just don't assign tasks for it, because it starts to lard down the coaching model. Don't hesitate to help them think of ways to prepare, if they want to do that, but don't require it.

I would also say if they start struggling to get work done and they've created a bunch of self-development tasks, you're like, "Dude, you can't have it both ways. Soft coaching is, I'm going to pay attention, give you lots of feedback. You don't need to be doing all that other stuff.

"If you're going to do all that other stuff and then complain that you don't have time to get your work done, I'm going to tell you, 'Your work is more important than the self-development task.'" The hardest soft coaching is them doing tasks that require them to use the skill that they want to improve.

Michael: Then the last part of soft coaching is assessing performance regularly. Sitting back and saying, "OK, this is where I think you are."

Mark: Yeah. As a general rule, if you're trying to improve something but you didn't set a goal, more frequent comparisons of where we are versus where we wanted to be are necessary. If there's no clear goal, you better periodically check, am I headed in the right direction? Do I feel good about where I'm going?

It's like the difference between heading east if you're in California and going to Times Square in New York City. In the former case, since there's no clearly defined goal, which therefore you can't attain, it's more necessary to review frequently whether you're doing what you said you were going to do, which is head east.

Otherwise, the lack of a goal and the lack of checking your progress is going to lead to lack of continued effort, particularly if you discover you're starting to go in the wrong direction. In the other case, until you get to Times Square, you know you're not there. Therefore, you know that more effort is required if you know where Times Square is.

The way you do that in the case of soft coaching is to have a discussion about how you and your direct feel about what level of performance they're at and how far they've gone and whether it's enough. In the example of this situation we're talking about, running meetings, it might sound like this.

"I'm feeling pretty good about how far you've progressed. I know there's more to do. In terms of how long you've been at it, four meetings or so in the last three weeks that you've run, you're getting pretty good at meetings. You're starting on time every time. You've gotten out an agenda.

"I do think you're still struggling with cutting off folks who ramble on. Maybe you can pay particular attention to that in the next two to three meetings." By the way, I might then privately go to a couple of my people and go, "Hey, dude, will you ramble on the next couple of meetings?" [laughs]

I mean, why not? If I'm operating in my own ecosystem, which I have the ability to influence significantly, I'm going to create situations that support my goals and objectives. You keep doing that, and look, if you thought it would take 3 weeks and it takes 10, don't worry about it. Yeah, OK, maybe it was a bad time for them. Maybe you were off your game a little bit.

If you're going to use soft coaching, that soft word is important. Don't say, "We're going to be done with this in four weeks," simply because you believe that's how long it's going to take them, and then discover that they've got a learning weakness, or you've got a scotoma, a blind spot for [inaudible 24:00], something, and it takes 10 weeks. You say, "Oh no, you're failing."

There's no failing here. If I'm heading east from California and I'm continuing to head east, I'm not going west, I'm not failing. If you define success as achieving a goal, and not achieving a goal is failing, you're failing, but that's an overly simplistic definition.

If you have a goal, failure is not achieving the goal within the time you ascribed. If you don't have a goal, making progress in the direction you hope to make is success. There is no failure.

Michael: Right, just like teaching your kid to walk, right? [laughs]

[crosstalk]

Michael: They fall down for three days. They don't get there, they fall down. "Ah, you failed. That's it."

Mark: "He started out as a failure. He's going to be a failure."

Michael: Why try?

Mark: Yeah. At some point, hopefully your assessment is going to cause you to say, "Hey, look, I think you got it. It wasn't a precise thing. It wasn't like we had a micrometer out here doing this, but you're running meetings now perfectly well enough for day-to-day life in this organization."

Now, when you get assigned your first cross-functional project, now when you get promoted to be a manager, meetings will be one less thing to worry about.

In fact, if people see you doing this now, if my boss pops in and for some reason you're running a meeting because I'm gone, and he sees you killing it, that's a notch in your belt in terms of being perceived as somebody who's ready for more responsibility, whatever form that more responsibility might take.

Michael: Wait a minute, but my boss doesn't know that I can run a meeting. He thinks that it's just my direct that's creating all the success in my organization.

Mark: Yeah, this is not a psychiatric podcast.

Michael: [laughs] Yeah, sorry.

Mark: How you feel is your fault. Let's summarize real quick. Soft coaching, it allows you to help a direct improve by paying attention to their work, their performance, their behavior, and just giving them lots of feedback about it. It doesn't require a lot of preparation, virtually none.

[background music]

Mark: It can be done in two to three minutes a week. If you're wanting some improvements, some professional development among your staff, with minimal time investment, try soft coaching.

Michael: All right, thanks my friend.

Mark: You bet, partner.

Michael: We'll see you next week or maybe tomorrow. I don't know.

Mark: Maybe tomorrow.

Michael: [laughs] So long, guys.

[music]