

# 6

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## Expert Coaching

**Y**ou are the coach of a high school basketball team. With just five games to go in the season, your team has a shot at the conference championship. Tonight is a must-win contest against the other championship contender. The players have completed their warm-up on the court and are now trooping into the locker room, where you will have a few minutes with them before the game begins. What do you want to accomplish in those few minutes? And how will you go about doing it?

Now it's halftime, and you are down by four points. Your team has played well, but the opponents played just a bit better—especially on defense. They succeeded in bottling up your best shooter, and toward the end of the half she was showing visible signs of frustration at her inability to get free to receive the ball. On the other hand, your defense has been almost as tight as theirs and the game looks to be one of the lowest-scoring contests of the season. While the players head for the locker room, you remain on the court briefly to check your observations about the first half with your assistant coach. What do you want to accomplish when you join the players in the locker room? And how will you go about doing it?

Now it's the day after the game, and the players have arrived for practice

in a celebratory mood. Down three points with two minutes to go last night, the offense suddenly jelled. In a spurt of intense and beautiful basketball, the team racked up seven points in rapid succession while holding the opponents scoreless. The four-point win felt like a rout, and horseplay and jollity abound in the prepractice warm-up. With the four remaining games all against lesser teams, the championship looks to be yours for the taking. You signal a halt to the warm-up and call the players to the sidelines to begin today's practice. What do you want to accomplish in this session? And how will you go about doing it?

These are the kinds of decisions that coaches must make all the time, regardless of whether they aim to help an athletic team play well, a service team please its customers, or an executive team make good decisions. Coaches, like the rest of us, think explicitly about concrete problems that they encounter, especially when those problems pack an emotional punch, and craft specific interventions that they think will help.<sup>1</sup> If, for example, the star of your basketball team had become obviously sullen or verbally aggressive about the fact that her teammates were not getting her the ball often enough, you unquestionably would have thought carefully about alternative ways of responding before taking action.

But when there is no specific, pressing problem to be solved, the human tendency is to keep on relatively mindlessly doing what one always has done, until something pops up that clearly does demand explicit attention and planned action.<sup>2</sup> That is why coaches so often overlook or under-exploit the special coaching opportunities that always are present at the beginnings, midpoints, and ends of task cycles. These oversights can be costly, because proactive coaching provided at the proper times in a team's life can head off team process problems that might otherwise emerge and, moreover, can increase the likelihood that the problems that *do* develop can be resolved without distracting members too much from their real work. Well-timed coaching for a team is like preventive maintenance for an automobile: We often forget to do it, but it can prevent future breakdowns and costly repairs.

## WHAT TEAM COACHING IS ABOUT

Coaching is about group processes. It involves direct interaction with a team that is intended to help members use their collective resources well

in accomplishing work. Examples of coaching include leading a launch meeting before work begins (which can help members become oriented to and engaged with their task), providing the team feedback about its problem analysis (which can increase the quality of its analytic work), or asking a team reflective questions about why members made a particular decision (which can help them make better use of their knowledge and experience). By contrast, a leader who personally coordinates the work of a team or who negotiates outside resources for its use is doing things that can be quite helpful to the team—but he or she is not coaching. Coaching is about building teamwork, not about doing the team's work.

Coaching can address any aspect of team interaction that is impeding members' ability to work well together or that shows promise of strengthening team functioning. In practice, however, a more focused approach brings better results. Research has identified three aspects of group interaction that have special leverage in shaping team effectiveness: the amount of *effort* members apply to their collective work, the appropriateness to the task and situation of the *performance strategies* they employ in carrying out the work, and the level of *knowledge and skill* they apply to the work.<sup>3</sup> Any group that expends sufficient effort in its work, deploys a performance strategy that is well aligned with task requirements, and brings ample talent to bear on its task is quite likely to achieve a high standing on the three criteria of work team effectiveness discussed in chapter 1. By the same token, teams that operate in ways that compromise their standing on these three performance processes—that is, members apply insufficient effort, inappropriate strategies, or inadequate talent to their work—probably will fall short on one or more of the effectiveness criteria.

To illustrate, consider customer service teams (CSTs) at Xerox.<sup>4</sup> When a photocopier stops working, the customer wants it fixed instantly. The task of the CSTs is to do just that—and to do it efficiently (spending no more time with a machine than actually is needed), inexpensively (keeping parts costs low), and well (fixing the machine so it stays fixed). Each team has a set of machines for which members collectively are responsible, usually associated with a geographical area or a single large customer such as a university or a corporation. CSTs at Xerox, under the guidance of Chuck Ray and his colleagues, generally performed quite well. But imagine, for a moment, the pattern of interaction that might have characterized one of the *worst* teams in the company.

As is common for CSTs, members of this hypothetical, poorly performing team meet at a coffee shop before launching the day's work. Members dawdle over breakfast, talking about anything but their work. The rest of the day also is leisurely, with technicians spending nearly as much time chatting up customers as working on machines. Individual technicians go through their paces, responding to the dispatcher's directives about where to go next, and calling a headquarters technical specialist if they encounter an unfamiliar machine malfunction. Any lessons learned in the course of the day are kept to one's self, and individuals rarely ask their teammates for help when a machine insists on staying broken. For this team, collective effort is low, members have no shared strategy about how they will approach their team's work, and they neither share their expertise with one another nor draw on their teammates' special skills. The customers of a team with these work processes would not enthuse about the service they receive, and company managers probably would have reason for concern about the team's speed of response and parts expenses. Nor is it likely that the team would spontaneously become stronger as a performing unit over time or that members would get much learning or fulfillment from their work experiences. This hypothetical team, then, would surely score low on all three of the criteria of team effectiveness discussed in chapter 1.

Now imagine that we have a magic wand that, when passed over members' heads while they are sipping their start-of-day coffee, completely reverses their standing on these same three performance processes. The content of the team's conversation is transformed into an informal but focused review of what went well and poorly the previous day, and what the team can learn from that. Members examine the work that is already laid out for the present day and discuss how they might get as far ahead as possible as soon as possible so they will be able to free up a member should a customer emergency arise. Given what they already know about the nature of the machine problems at various sites, about the special expertise of each member, and about their geographical area, they decide how to divide up and sequence the morning's work. As the day progresses, they are in frequent touch with one another by telephone to see how things are going and to fine-tune their strategy in response to any unanticipated problems or opportunities. When one member gets stuck on a particularly difficult job that looks as if it may require replacement of some expensive parts, the member who has the most experience with that

particular machine type heads off to assist the stuck colleague. The team leader confers with other team members about how their work plans should be revised to accommodate this unanticipated (but not uncommon) development. As the day progresses, each member makes notes about things learned and problems encountered that may warrant discussion at the next morning's breakfast meeting. The application of a little magic has resulted in a remarkable turnaround in the team's level of collective effort, in the task appropriateness of its work strategy, and in the utilization of its members' talents. And, surely, this transformed team would stand high on all three effectiveness criteria.

There is, of course, no magic wand for leaders to use in shaping up a shoddy team. Still, as we have seen in previous chapters, there is much they can do when setting up a team to improve the chances that its performance processes will more closely approximate the second team than the first in the above illustration: They can provide their teams with a compelling direction, an enabling team structure, and a supportive organizational context.<sup>5</sup> These basic conditions provide the foundation for superb team performance, and no amount of coaching can compensate if they are badly flawed. When conditions *are* favorable, however, coaching can significantly enhance team performance processes. To see how, we need to look more closely at each of the three processes to identify the opportunities, and the vulnerabilities, a team encounters in managing member effort, in selecting and implementing its task performance strategies, and in utilizing members' talents. We do that in the next section, and then identify what coaches can do—and when they can do it—to help a work team manage the three key performance processes efficiently and well.

## PROCESS LOSSES AND GAINS

All task-performing teams encounter what psychologist Ivan Steiner calls “process losses,” and all potentially can create synergistic process gains. Process losses are inefficiencies or internal breakdowns that keep a group from doing as well as it theoretically could, given its resources and member talents.<sup>6</sup> They develop when members interact in ways that depress the team's effort, the appropriateness of its strategy, or the utilization of member talent, and they waste or misapply member time, energy, and expertise. Process gains develop when members interact in ways that

enhance collective effort, generate uniquely appropriate strategies for working together, or actively develop members' knowledge and skills. When this happens, the team has created *new* internal resources that can be used in its work, capabilities that did not exist before the team created them. As seen in table 6-1, there are special kinds of process losses and process gains associated with each of the three performance processes.

### *Effort*

There are always some “overhead costs” to be paid when groups perform tasks. Merely coordinating members' activities, for example, takes some time and energy away from productive work, resulting in a level of actual productivity that is less than what would be obtained if members used their resources completely efficiently. The most pernicious effort-related process loss, however, is social loafing—the tendency we all have to slack off a bit when working in groups, to exert less effort on team tasks than we do when performing work that is ours alone. As noted in chapter 4, social loafing occurs because individuals usually can hide to some extent in a team. Moreover, each team member may feel less personally responsible for collective performance outcomes because there are, so to speak, multiple hands on the wheel.

For very large groups with very boring tasks, such as two dozen volunteers who share responsibility for stuffing thousands of envelopes for a political campaign, social loafing can become too pervasive for members

**TABLE 6 - 1**

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### **Characteristic Process Losses and Gains for Each of the Three Performance Processes**

#### **Effort**

Process loss: Social loafing by team members

Process gain: Development of high shared commitment to the team and its work

#### **Performance Strategy**

Process loss: Mindless reliance on habitual routines

Process gain: Invention of innovative, task-appropriate work procedures

#### **Knowledge and Skill**

Process loss: Inappropriate weighting of member contributions

Process gain: Sharing of knowledge and development of member skills