



Making Asia a Great Place to Work

Coaching: The Future for Organizational Learning

Steve Morris, Head Coach,
Steve Morris Associates

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Business organizations, like tribal societies, only thrive when their members have a common set of interests and objectives. The role of their leaders is to pass on their knowledge and experience to the younger members to ensure continuity and even survival. Trust and concern for the individual is fundamental to the success of this process but does not often come naturally in a modern organizational environment, especially as we get older. Coaching and mentoring are learning styles that help people to clarify and align their goals towards the common purpose, share knowledge and engender trust.

In the global marketplace organizations face an ever-increasing amount of change – whether it be a high turnover of personnel, mergers and acquisitions, or adapting to the possibilities and

impact of new technologies. Constant review of the marketplace, core business and market strategies is essential if the organization is to continue to perform strongly through these changes. Essential to the success of this activity is recognition that the real value of the organization lies in its knowledge base and not in its product.

Our knowledge of market needs and processes is people-dependent and not information-dependent. It goes home at night with the employees and cannot be locked away in filing cabinets and desk drawers. Some companies try to control processes through databases and sophisticated information systems - these too are people-dependent. Systems can and do fail and they need people to update them and keep them current. Ultimately, we must put our trust in people (their knowledge and their loyalty) and not in the systems.

The message is: "Don't try to manage skills and knowledge through technology. This is a self-defeating path. We will always need people to provide input to the decision, or to make the decision, or to implement it. There are no permanently closed systems."



Defining the problem

Organizational turbulence is perceived as a threat to the existing power base but it is in fact an opportunity for people to define and redefine themselves in 'real' time: Who are we now? Where are we going next? Turbulence is here to stay, so we should accept it and learn to thrive within it. Our future performance will be dependent on our balance, flexibility and adaptability in the face of turbulence.

In the next few years we can expect a return to a higher turnover in the labor market, higher wage expectations and yet more change. "Change is Chaos is Change." High rates of change mean that people feel less in control. This is especially true in mergers and acquisitions when senior-most people feel most threatened. This leads to more anxiety and it can be several years before everything settles down and people regain focus and direction. Movement at the top means that leaders wait until they feel in control before they respond. This leads to a slowdown in the business, anxiety and atrophy.

Systems can't help here. Without trust, technology is not relevant. For example, you can use a computerized wristwatch to keep score in a tennis match but this will still not stop disputes over line calls and points won and lost.

Finding an answer

How do we remain in control without being in control? All too often defensive positions are dug: don't share knowledge; increase our own employability; take an MBA; learn a new language; train in new skills; do something to hedge our bets beyond our current employer; seek security through political networking and allies. Such zero-sum defensive strategies are all win-lose, and hence socially sub-optimal.

The main issue here is that insecurity and lack of trust permeate all levels of the organization. There is a lack of *loyalty* from employees but deeper than this is a lack of *trust* in the leaders - lack of loyalty is a symptom of lack of trust. To effect a cure, we must treat the underlying disease and not the

obvious symptoms – they will clear up later of their own accord. We don't treat lack of loyalty, therefore, but we do treat lack of trust.

To the extent that leaders don't fully trust people, they set up systems and controls – which, as we have seen, cannot work without trust. So how do we end this vicious circle? What are leaders doing to restore trust in themselves and their organizations? What are they doing to restore their own trust in others - their leaders, their peers, their teams?

Although staff turnover in Asia has dramatically decreased in the last few years, this cannot be taken as an indicator of increasing employee satisfaction. Redundancies, lay-offs and hiring freezes have led to fewer people in the workplace with higher levels of stress and lower levels of trust. Where there are fewer opportunities people are staying put but they may feel very much like 'prisoners of work'. As market growth returns, existing employees will be stretched even further and many companies can expect a backlash from disgruntled employees.

If some organizations lose their talent others, it would seem, must benefit by attracting new talent. When people join a new company, however, they don't necessarily share their knowledge and skills. Instead they soak up what is new in the new company. Some wander from company to company like 'nomads' who are absorbing our organizational knowledge rather than sharing their experience.

What motivates people to work?

Why do we work? Is work a chore? Do people take chances and progress because they have to? People make their own choices in how they approach work. The first step in addressing people's needs, and motivating them to higher performance, is to find out what they want. Steve Morris Associates, in the course of its unique 'Best Places to Work in Asia' Survey, has asked hundreds of employees what they value most in their workplace, what they find particularly motivating in their job, and what they think makes a great place to work.

From responses received, even in money-conscious

Singapore, it seems that work is not at all about money. The money-related question that rated highest in terms of importance to workers, at 34 out of 150, was 'Within my team, I am fairly paid for my contribution'. The question 'My boss shows his/her appreciation by awarding me monetary rewards' ranked as low as 96 in terms of importance. Money, therefore, is important but it's more about *fair* pay than *high* pay – most people need a better reason than money alone to get themselves to work.

"Money compensates, leadership motivates." Management doesn't motivate, leaders do. When leaders fail to motivate, people seek damages or compensation for their unmet expectations. It is employees in poor workplace environments who tend to focus on compensation issues. So leaders who focus on money are addressing the symptom and not the problem. Of course we need to make people feel fairly paid for their contributions. Beyond that, it is all up to the leadership to build loyalty and motivation.

How do we know where we stand in the hearts and minds of our employees? We can ask them. Feedback is the first step in seeing ourselves as others see us. It is vital for learning and constant feedback is essential to keep it dynamic. Otherwise we are no better than experimental animals, learning and repeating reflex actions which no longer relate to reality.

Leadership feedback should not cover hard skills, the ability to balance the books etc., but rather address shaping behaviors, the soft skills. It is an opportunity for leaders to know where they stand from a perspective that they cannot see themselves. As well as blind spots it may uncover opportunities and, above all, help the leader to identify areas for development.

Leaders need to adopt new behaviors especially in the soft skills to win the hearts and minds of workers. Such soft skills are both in short supply and needed/wanted – as evidenced by exit interviews. They are most often found in the older,

wiser employee, underscoring the value-add of this employee segment - in contrast to the preference shown to the young by organizations relying on IT skills. Invest in people with experience and younger employees will benefit by their access to this wisdom.

By investing in a leader's ability to inspire trust and loyalty you are also investing in the organization's ability to grow and succeed. This is a business-driven process. For example, President John F Kennedy's vision for a man on the moon before the end of the decade (1960s) motivated NASA and all its service providers to achieve it. President Kennedy didn't put any systems in place but his vision was a rallying point and inspired all those in the Apollo program to meet their target in the required time scale.

The older learner

As leaders we are keen to promote learning in our organizations. Ironically the more senior we are, the more resistant to change and less open to new ideas we become. Success and seniority often lead to adult learning dysfunction.

Young children don't think about learning; they just learn and have fun as they learn. They're always laughing. As they get older, they start to be concerned about things like ego, rivalry, saving face, and the opposite sex. All sorts of factors get in the way of learning and being open. By the time we become adults, we've put so many obstacles in our own way that it's amazing we manage to learn anything new at all. So we need help from a coach who is sensitive to our feelings and able to create an environment in which we feel safe to learn again.

Young children trust their football or swimming coaches and do as they are told. They learn as they play and have fun. Children's games facilitate learning. Teenagers can still learn but they are starting to feel more self-conscious about getting it wrong and can hesitate to attempt something they might fail at. They forget that they have peer support, teammates who are willing them to succeed. There are three game rules, which a coach

will reinforce.

- ◆ It is okay to make mistakes (this is a way of learning),
- ◆ Everyone is here to learn and improve (everyone can).
- ◆ You should relax, have fun and enjoy the game.

Returning to the corporate world. We shouldn't set a culture where people are blamed for mistakes but instead teach them how to learn from them – all mistakes are teachable moments. "Good judgment comes from experience, and a lot of that comes from bad judgment." People never stop growing and can always learn more and further improve themselves. When we stop improving we stagnate and die - companies too. We should remember that business is part of the game of life – we are allowed to enjoy it and have fun.

Coaching for performance

Coaching in sport focuses on enabling the individual or the team to produce their best performance in the game. Coaching in business is just the same: enabling the individual or the team to produce their best performance in the workplace. To maximize its impact coaching skills should be passed down through the organization: coach your leaders to coach their managers to coach their staff.

Team coaching means that the leadership team, like a professional athletic team, has a dedicated resource that is solely accountable for preparing and training the team to achieve higher performance. The team coach's interest is to help individuals succeed within the context of helping the team succeed. The coach links the team's success to the achievement of business and organizational goals while meeting, or exceeding, each individual member's needs and expectations.

Just like sport, technical coaching develops the basic skills that everybody needs, such as communication and teamwork. Strategic coaching develops the ability to see the big picture, the vision and mission, and make it reality throughout the team. Coaching also develops the ability to respond fast, and apply

the skills to compete as a high-performing team, in competition with other teams, with every team member performing well under pressure – working harder, but working smarter.

Coaching differs from training in that it ensures that team members regularly test and apply their learning in their actual work environment, addressing real business needs. An effective coaching relationship is paced and spaced regularly over time, so it ensures continuity and consistent attention to the development of new skills and abilities. The coaching process should provide a full cycle of assessment, feedback, planning, development, and reassessment and, of course, celebration.

As we grow, we tend to laugh and smile less. On average a child smiles nearly 200 times a day, an adult only twelve. Where has the laughter gone? Have we become so competitive and so focused on ourselves that we see fear and failure everywhere in the workplace? Is it because the older we get, the less we learn and grow? Have we become rigid and inflexible, and 'out of balance'? To reclaim our balance, we can learn from our children, relax and have fun.

Leaders can create an environment where everyone enjoys learning. The perception is that the race is won on the track so we become afraid to take pitstops - we are pressured on short-term earnings instead of looking to long-term performance. Leaders should set the long-term pace and look on a pitstop as a way of better preparing to win. What Formula 1 driver ever won without stopping to change tires and take on new fuel? The challenge is to know when to drive through and when a refresher is needed, when to push to the edge of the envelope and when to settle back. People make these decisions, not systems - that's what makes life so much fun and interesting!

About the author

In 1998, Steve Morris founded Steve Morris Associates to coach leaders in Asia to respond to global economic and organizational challenges. Steve coaches and inspires chief executives and their teams within a multitude of cultures and industries to develop themselves and those around them to achieve personal goals, job satisfaction and business performance. He is one of a handful of coaches in Asia that specialize in helping leaders nurture and refine their command of the softer skills of people development and motivation.

About the company

International leadership consultancy Steve Morris Associates, the first dedicated leadership coaching company in Asia, coaches leaders in Asia to forge stronger teamwork at the top of the organization while fully developing employee potential. SMA designs and conducts leadership development and feedback programs that are linked to the achievement of business goals by working directly with employees at all levels.

For further information, please contact:
Steve Morris Associates,
One Phillip Street #05-00, Singapore 048692
Tel: +65 538 7228
Fax: +65 538 1662
Email: headcoach@aspire.com.sg
Website: www.aspire.com.sg

