

COACHING AND COUNSELLING SKILLS

*Notes for a paper to the 1992 Regional Managers' conference,
derived from a seminar attended by R J Underwood,
August 1992*

"If you don't know where you are going, any road will get you there!"

In all their endeavours, the men and women of CALM need to have explicit goals - departmental, regional, professional, personal. These goals are the destinations to which we wish to travel. As in map-reading, once our destination is known, it is so much easier to select the best route to get us there.

In previous years I have talked to you about the importance of teamwork, and the crucial role of the Regional Manager in building and maintaining effective work teams in regions and districts. Well-managed teams produce results where the quality and output of work is way beyond the sum of the parts involved. Productive, cooperative and creative teams are also happy and stimulating places to be - and considering most of us spend 60 to 80% of our waking hours at work, we should try to make sure that this time is joyously, rather than dismally spent.

However, teams are comprised of individuals. So another key job for Regional Managers is to help individual staff, who are also members of teams, to develop and manage individual goals. Managing individual goal setting and goal achievement within teams is just as much part of the RM's job as is setting up and managing the work of a team itself.

In my mind I distinguish between our two roles as follows: *concentrating on the team and its output is when we are performing as a Leader and Manager; concentrating on the individual within the team is when we are acting as a Coach.*

Coaching and counselling individuals is a tricky and often daunting task. It is demanding mentally, and it requires excellent social skills and life experience. We also have to recognise our own prejudices and preferences - for example some of us prefer to coach the winning player rather than the problem player, or vice versa. I can remember it being said of a former Conservator of Forests (T N Stoate) that "if you worked hard and produced he was always at your side helping, encouraging, pushing, rewarding; but if you were a non-performer he would simply ignore you." I can empathise with this approach because it is the mold I naturally fall into myself and have to fight against. To ignore any individual in the team is bad coaching, and also bad leadership and management, as it lets down the other team members. The best coach will devote himself equally to the willing players (to ensure they do not drop off in performance, or leave), and the problem players (to sort them out, or get rid of them).

Analysing your team members

The start point of good coaching is to recognise that very person on your team differs. They have different skills, talents, knowledge, ideas, insights, work ethic, reliability, family and educational background, behavioural style and so on.

These differences are good and should be encouraged; diversity is a source of energy and information. It makes the team more robust and helps us tackle difficult problems.

But it provides a big challenge for the Regional Manager. Because every individual is different, you need to tailor your communications style and your relationship with every person.

I advise each of you to spend some hours sitting quietly and analysing the talents, skills and personality of each individual in your team. Write down your analysis.

You also need to analyse your own style, as best you can.

Only then can you work out (often by trial and error) the most effective style you have to adopt to communicate with each person when you are in coaching/counselling mode. The one style will not fit everyone!

Assigning staff to positions

One of the weaknesses in CALM is the difficulty a RM has in making work assignments. This is because we have inherited the public service situation of people moving for promotion to advertised positions. In other words, usually the position comes first and then we try to fit a person into it.

Accepting this, we should still make every effort to take advantage of our knowledge about our people's strengths and weaknesses when assigning them to positions within a team. A well-assigned person (where strengths match the requirements of the task and complement the weaknesses of other team members) maximises productivity, self-esteem and team-esteem. Poor assignments resulting from the inflexibilities of public service constraints, need to be quickly identified and fixed as soon as possible by reassignment.

Re-assignment of a person within a team or from one team to another calls for good counselling skills, and must be tackled thoughtfully. A critical thing is how the reassignment is seen in "the eyes of the beholder", especially the person reassigned. If reassignment is done properly it motivates, if not it will be perceived as "dumping".

As coaches of the regional team, you will be continually adjusting your teams to get the right mix of people and strengths. In this process, be prepared to devote a lot of energy to managing the process of reassignment properly, ie dealing with the individual within the team.

Five steps to a successful coaching strategy

1. You must have clearly stated goals which are shared with every member in the team. [No secret agendas!]
2. You must have means of measuring progress. [Individuals as well as the team need to know how they are going.]
3. You must have participatory management. [Unless there is ownership of decisions there is no commitment to them.]
4. You must have open communications. Disagreement is okay but must be civil. [Internal criticism hurts, but it must be voiced, and it must be heard by the boss or problems will not be tackled.]

5. Work should be fun. [If people enjoy themselves, productivity and goodwill soar.]

The 20 secrets of the world's greatest coaches

How do you rate yourself on the following score card?

	SCORECARD				
	LOW				HIGH
	1	2	3	4	5
1. Be available					
2. Promote participation					
3. Build relationships					
4. Utilize delegation					
5. Provide feedback					
6. Allow mistakes					
7. Be a role model					
8. Offer training					
9. Have high expectations					
10. Set goals					
11. Share information					
12. Celebrate attempts					
13. Encourage teamwork					
14. Grow experts					
15. Reward innovation					
16. Have unannounced celebrations					
17. Say "thanks"					
18. Show your emotions (+ and -)					
19. Pick your issues carefully					
20. Be a team player					
TOTAL					

Each Regional Manager should regularly check out his performance against the Coach's score card with the aim of scoring 5s in each category. It is a good idea to also ask your team members to rate you and see how they perceive you as their Coach.

Communication skills

The secret to a good coaching relationship is rapport, and this in turn depends on good communication skills.

Communication involves *both* sending and receiving messages.

Sending messages

1. Behavioural language is important. Don't label people (for example, "You are useless") but talk about their behaviour - ie, what it is the person says or does. For example, say "When you do or say 'so and so' I don't like it and I don't want you to do it again. Instead what I want is"
2. Recognise that there is always some truth in the other person's position. Accept it and say so.
3. Don't try to argue against anger or emotions.
4. Be very specific about issues which concern you. Say what you like or don't like and what you want or don't want. State what your needs are and ask that they be met. Avoid exaggeration in stating your concerns.
5. There are three ways you can send a message: in writing (this provides words only); by telephone (this provides words plus vocal emphasis); or in a person-to-person meeting (which involves verbal, vocal and body language). Person-to-person message sending is always the best. This is because people need to know what you are feeling as well as what you want.
6. Always double-check that your message is understood, not just heard. This is the great advantage of discussing written agreed missions with people.

Receiving messages

1. The key is good listening and to seek clarification of every point which is not clearly understood as you go along.
2. In a situation where you don't have good rapport with one of your staff it is a good idea to establish ground rules for a communication session before it starts (eg, we won't interrupt each other and we won't take phone calls or interruptions).
3. In seeking clarification ask specific questions, not open-ended questions.
4. Paraphrase the content of messages back and forth. For example, "Do you mean.....?" or "Is what you want.....?" This minimises misunderstandings.
5. Try to reflect back the feelings and emotions of the other person. If they are happy, excited, calm or angry you should try to match your mood to their's.

Loyalty

Loyalty to the team leader and to other members of the team is one of the most important features Regional Managers should be seeking. People love to be part of a loyal and exciting team. They like the recognition which comes to them, the involvement, the feeling of belonging, the fun, the mutual support and the insight into other people's jobs.

Building a loyal team is also one of your most difficult jobs. This is because you have to balance individual strengths against individual weaknesses, team goals versus individual goals and healthy competition versus destructive competition.

The latter is very topical in CALM at the moment as different teams compete for resources within the Department. We need to remind each other that healthy competition is fun (it's okay to strive to win but not to strive to hurt the opposition). In destructive competition the losers are hurt and none of us want this.

Incentives

Managers often attempt to reward good team effort by providing incentives. Rewards are good but there are some dangers. For example,

- a team reward can unwittingly reward a poor performer within the team
- a cash bonus or a gift can be perceived as "easy" and impersonal
- the annual bonus can become expected and therefore no longer is an incentive

The most useless reward is the ambiguous one - people are not sure what they did to earn it.

The most effective incentives involve

- rewards chosen by the team members themselves
- rewards which are visible to other people
- rewards which are perceived to be a genuine incentive by the recipients
- rewards tied to measurable and achievable tasks

Morale and enthusiasm

Morale involves the team and the big picture, whereas *enthusiasm* involves the individual and the task.

I have dealt with the approaches to building good team morale in previous papers. Basically people need job security, recognition of the value of their efforts, understanding of their needs, interesting work, a sense of accomplishment, positive feedback and fair pay. If we can meet these needs our teams will have high morale.

But even in a high morale team, an individual may have low enthusiasm. This can usually be recognised by:

- lack of participation in meetings
- keeping other team members at a distance
- putting effort into the wrong place
- letting others do the work
- putting off the start of new projects
- sloppy work
- slow progress

The unenthusiastic or unwilling team member will quickly drag down his or her colleagues and needs to be dealt with immediately by the Regional Manager.

Coaching the problem person

There are basically two sorts of problem people: those with whom you have a relationship problem and those who are not performing. (Sometimes these situations are linked or overlap.)

Relationship problems can be dealt with in only three ways:

- fix the relationship
- live with the relationship
- leave the relationship (ie, you leave or the other person leaves)

There is not a fourth option, ie to complain about the relationship, or to say that it is someone else's problem.

If a relationship problem cannot be fixed, or if you cannot leave or fire the person, or you are not prepared to leave or fire the person, then you must learn to live with the problem as happily as possible. Whingeing about it is not acceptable.

I will talk about fixing relationships later in this paper, but first some advice on how to deal with four common types of problem people.

1. How to handle the person who is a constant fault finder, complainer or criticiser.
 - Always thank them politely for raising the issue.
 - Take notes on the points they are raising, show you are listening and understand their complaint.
 - Ask them for solutions - "What exactly do you want *me* to do about it?" or "What exactly do *you* intend to do about this issue?"
 - Write out the agreed action steps and apply a timeframe.
2. How to handle the anti-social loner.
 - Tell them how important it is to you to hear from them regularly.
 - Tell them and show them you value their point of view.
 - Reinforce to them the value of their contribution to the team.
3. How to handle the time waster or slacker.
 - Always ask them to provide you with a completion deadline with every task. Ensure these deadlines are acceptable to you and achievable.
 - Follow up on the deadlines and if they are met thank them, if they are not kick them up the bum.
 - Never let them get away with not meeting their own deadlines.
4. Coping with anti-management or team snipers.
 - Ask them to list real issues and provide solutions.

- Ask them to come to you direct with their problems, not to go outside the team.
- Always try to use their contribution and acknowledge and give credit to them where due.
- If they are hurting a good team, and will not or cannot change their approach, you must get rid of them.

Fixing a relationship problem

Relationship problems between Regional Managers and their staff are extremely stressful and often very difficult to manage. If you face up to the fact that you only have three options (fix it, live with it or leave it) and you are not prepared to live with it or you cannot leave it, then you have to tackle it and try to fix it.

The first step is to decide whether the matter really is important. If it is trivial it is probably not worth making too much of a fuss about it. If it is important, either to you or to the person involved, then it must be tackled.

The second step is to define the problem carefully. It must be defined in terms of the person's *behaviour* not their *personality*. For example, it is insufficient to say a person is "moody". What you need to define is specifically how does he or she *behave* at such times and what specifically is unacceptable in this behaviour.

The next step is to decide whether they have the potential to change. In most cases the answer will be "yes", but if it really is "no" then the person must be terminated. Unacceptable behaviour which cannot be changed or the incapacity to acquire essential skills, must not be tolerated.

The next step is to try to determine whether they acknowledge that a problem exists and accept that something needs to be done about it, ie that change is needed. This is the most critical step in the whole process. Very few people are prepared to acknowledge their own need for change when they have a relationship problem with someone else.

If the problem is acknowledged and the need for change is accepted there are usually two options. The first is to look at training, skills acquisition, rewards or punishments. However, it is unusual for relationship problems to be fixed in these ways. The more likely option chosen is to hold a counselling session with the person involved, and seek to change behaviour and attitude.

Holding a counselling session

Holding a counselling session is a bit like public speaking - good preparation is essential.

Before you start

- Analyse the risks involved. You could worsen the relationship, lose the person, create union turmoil or simply reinforce the problem. Are these risks worth it?
- List the possible benefits, such as opening lines of communications with the person, resolving the problem, decreasing stress in the team and increasing trust.

- Set out your goals and objectives, firstly for the session itself (what we want the person to commit themselves to) and secondly for the long term (what we want them to achieve for ever more).
- Schedule plenty of time (as long as it takes).
- Make sure the session is private with no interruptions.
- Know when to leave it to the professionals. Our job is to try to fix up "normal" relationship problems on the job. We are not trained or competent to deal with genuine psychological disturbance or illness, and we should never try to deal with them.

During the session

- It is quite okay to acknowledge that you find these sessions difficult and that you are unhappy or uncomfortable, if this is the case. This may help to establish rapport.
- Outline the problem as you see it, and try to seek agreement from them that there is a problem. Indicate that it is both your problem and their problem. Emphasise and talk about the consequences of past behaviour - for you and the other team members.
- Talk about the likely and desirable consequences of future behaviour. See if you can get him or her to agree that this would be a good thing.
- Don't threaten.
- See if you can tease out all the alternative ways to fix the problem.
- See if you can reach some mutual commitments. Try to develop these as a contract between the two of you ("I will try to do, you will try to do")
- Try to come up with some method of measuring progress.
- Schedule the next meeting and make sure you make it, irrespective of whether success or failure results.
- Follow up and keep records. It is particularly important to follow up a counselling session with some written words which summarise what happened and what is the agreed approach.

Things to be prepared for

- Anger - listen and empathise, show you care but ask for facts to support angry assertions.
- Tears - simply wait quietly till they stop.
- Denial - clearly state the facts as you have seen them, specific behaviour that you have observed and which is a problem to you.
- Silence - say "I need to know what you think". As a last resort ask them to come back tomorrow and make a statement to you about their position.

Problems further down the line

It is quite common for a Regional Manager to have to deal with relationship problems further down the line - eg, between one of your district managers and a member of their staff, or between a ranger-in-charge and a ranger.

The first general step to overcome this is to provide your DMs with coaching on how to be a coach. Go through these notes with them. Because DMs tend to be younger and have less life-experience and because they are often dealing with very difficult field staff, they need very good guidance on coaching and counselling skills.

The second action is to make it quite clear whenever you think there is a problem which you want sorted out. Occasionally you will know about behaviour or performance problems before the DM. This means *you* are part of *his* network.

Finally you should help your DM develop his/her position by developing a clear statement of the behaviour you regard as acceptable (do not let a DM enter a counselling session with an open-ended position); and by follow-up reviews of progress.

Coaching the willing performer

There are two categories of willing performer and each needs to be dealt with in a slightly different way.

Those who are enthusiastic and hard working but lack skills or experience are usually best dealt with by establishing a mentor relationship either with yourself or another senior experienced person in the organisation. Mentoring has priceless advantages in passing on wisdom and building good judgement in young people.

Those who are enthusiastic and hard working and do have skills and experience, but lack opportunity, are best dealt with by empowering them to act independently. However, it is essential to spell out the ground rules before doing so. Independent thinking is fine, but independent and unbounded operations by young people in a department like CALM can lead to chaos, which in turn will lead to more counselling sessions than anyone needs!

References

- Bolton, Robert: *People skills*.
 Braham, Barbara: *Calm down. How to manage stress at work*.
 Fournies, Ferdinand: *Coaching for improved work performance*.