

Success Story: Strategy-Linked Leadership Program

<p>Situation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low levels of communication between managers and direct reports was creating morale problems and the threat of employee turnover. • Slow growth of company was limiting the number of promotion opportunities. • Limited promotion opportunities kept managers from engaging in coaching discussions of any sort.
<p>Role of Facilitator</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design a learning experience that helped managers incorporate coaching into their regular management practice. • Involve senior management in the learning experience as role models. • Teach early pilots. • Conduct train-the-trainer sessions to hand off delivery to internal trainers and OD consultants.
<p>Results</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased number of staff members with development plans. • Increased acceptance of the coaching responsibility among leaders within the company.

Background

When Printtech Systems (not its real name) received the results of their company-wide employee opinion survey, one thing was clear. Employees were not satisfied with the amount of feedback that they were getting. Follow up focus groups pointed to two sets of concerns. First, there did not seem to be enough feedback on performance—good or bad. Second, employees felt that their managers were not interested in talking with them about long term career prospects with Printtech.

I had been working for several months as an executive coach inside Printtech, so I was familiar with the company. My contact, the Vice President for Talent Management, introduced me to the head of Learning and Development to see if I could help them develop a coaching skills program for managers. As we began

planning the program, the head of Learning and Development interviewed a cross section of managers. What he learned was that the lack of coaching had its roots in three areas: organizational obstacles, role expectations, and skill.

The Issues: Organizational obstacles, role expectations, skill

Managers were reluctant, we learned, to discuss long term career discussions with their employees because they didn't want to raise expectations. The company was not growing, so there weren't many career opportunities. Why, they reasoned, open up a discussion that would only frustrate the employees? Secondly, the manager's role in this company had always been one of ensuring that employees did not make mistakes. The manager was an overseer, not a development coach. Lastly, there was the issue of skill—what does a manager *do* as coach and how do you do it?

We concluded that the proper response to the organizational need identified in the opinion survey had to be more than a course. It would need to build support for coaching among senior management, the HR organization, and the participating managers themselves. The coaching skills program became the vehicle for introducing a new leadership role for managers in the company.

The Response

Here's what we did to use a coaching skills program to build leadership at Printtech. First, we started by ensuring that there was an integrated approach within the HR organization. HR had three major sub-functions: Learning and Development, Organization Development, and HR Operations. For coaching to become embedded as a leadership practice, there needed to be coordination among these three groups. This was a relatively easy sell, but it required more coordination than had gone on in the past.

L&D committed to provide the venue for creating awareness and developing skill; OD would then provide the reinforcement as they consulted with the individual business units; Ops oversaw the performance management system and committed to act as an accountability mechanism to ensure at minimum that coaching discussions were taking place during the annual review process.

Second, we created a program design that embedded skill practice sessions into discussions of coaching and leadership. We used real case examples that highlighted the dilemmas that Printtech managers faced when coaching different types of individuals. We also engaged in peer coaching sessions that raised expectations that everyone could become a better coach, not just of direct reports, but of each other.

Third, we involved members of the senior leadership team. Although the employee survey indicated that there needed to be more and better coaching, at least two members of the 8-person senior team were themselves thought to be outstanding coaches. We enrolled those senior leaders to be part of the instructional team. As the program rolled out, we found other people who were also willing to be part of the instructional team, so that we always had role models with real-world stories to illustrate both coaching skills and the leadership challenges of being a good coach.

Finally, we expanded the cadre of facilitators. After our core design team had taught the first two programs, my task was to make the necessary revisions and create a detailed leader's guide for the program. I conducted a train-the-trainer session for members of the OD organization, so that as the program was introduced to the rest of the organization, there was always a member of the L&D organization and a member of the OD organization leading each program.

The program has been running for more than a year. It has also been adapted for use by some of the smaller divisions within the company. The number of development plans being submitted at annual review time has increased significantly, and informal indications are that when the next opinion survey is conducted the scores will reflect an increase in communication that is behind the development planning discussions.