

Bench Strength

It's vital to sustain success.



by Howard M. Guttman

BENCH STRENGTH IS key to the success of every sports team.

It's an equally critical factor in the success of leadership teams. Investing in tomorrow's leaders is one of the best ways an organization can sustain success far into the future. Neglecting to do so is bound to result in a talent void that leads to mediocrity in the short run and, over time, diminished business results. In a perfect world, there would be no limitations on the resources available to invest in up-and-coming leaders. Organizations would be able to give every promising young manager all the skills and support needed to prepare them to take over the reins. It's a pleasant dream, but in a world where doing more with much less has become the norm, it's further than ever from reality. So, given the real constraints under which companies must operate, how can today's executives green the next generation of leaders? The challenge is especially acute when you consider that tomorrow's leaders are likely to come from the pool of middle managers who typically aren't given coaching support, despite the increasing performance pressure they face.

Organizations may not be able to provide high-potential employees with *professional coaching*, but they can provide them with a sound *coaching process* that they can use to acquire the leadership skills that propel them ahead.

For over 20 years, I've coached hundreds of leaders using a rigorous, disciplined process that follows *seven steps*: 1) Determine the person's coachability; 2) Select and commit to an intention; 3) Identify a mentor and stakeholders; 4) Solicit feedback; analyze and respond to feedback; 6) Develop and act on a game plan; and 7) track success and recalibrate.

Self-coaching is a variation on the executive coaching process. For example, in the absence of a coach, the individual who wants to self-coach must determine his or her own *self-coachability*; instead of having a *mentor and stakeholders* identified by the coach,

self-coachees need to select their own *Guide* and *Circle of Support*. Having a process in place can't ensure success.

Three Preconditions

Three preconditions must be in place for coaching or self-coaching to "take." As a leader, you can help your talent to self-coach by ensuring that these three preconditions are met.

First, the coachee needs accurate data to understand the current "actual" and what winning looks like. We are often called in to coach an executive who is doing quite well but would like to take his performance to a higher level. The person's manager or a HR professional briefs us on the situation and provides us with initial data. In subsequent interviews with the potential coachee, we use a number of qualitative and

quantitative tools to gather more detailed information on the situation.

In the absence of a *professional coach*, you can meet with individuals in your area of responsibility who have an interest in self-coaching to provide some initial data. You can point out behaviors that they can modify, eliminate, or adopt: *Do they need to speak up more at meetings? Lead by influencing rather than commanding? Become more politically savvy? Deliver on promises? Learn to be less sensitive to feedback?* By providing an accurate, unvarnished description of their behavior and the things that need to change, you help them set a realistic intention that will serve them well.

Second, the coachee needs a Guide—someone who is in a position to observe his progress and help him stay on track. Our initial information about a potential coachee usually comes from a third party: the boss or a member of the HR function. In effect, this person is the coachee's mentor, or Guide: the point person throughout the coaching, who

receives updates from the coach and coachee and helps them over rough spots in the road.

Without a Guide, it's easy to derail and not know how to get back on track. As an observer who is on the scene yet remains objective, a Guide can spot trouble in its earliest stages and recommend adjustments to the self-coachee's plan. A Guide should be someone who is in a position to assess the self-coachee's progress on a regular basis as he or she tries to move his or her game ahead with new, positive actions. The Guide needs to be completely honest, willing to hold up the mirror so that the self-coachee can view him- or herself, warts and all.

As a leader in your organization, you know what it takes to get ahead and what behaviors are likely to hold a person back. You have been there, done that. You would be an excellent Guide for your direct reports and others with whom you work on an ongoing basis. In other instances, you may be able to assist self-coachees in selecting a trusted colleague to play this role.

Third, the coachee or self-coachee must be willing to go beyond his or her comfort zone, drop defenses and become vulnerable, to take a leap of faith in order to improve his or her life. Self-coaching requires a deep commitment and hard work. *Not everyone is a good candidate.* I have developed a *menu of questions* that people can ask to determine whether or not they are *able, ready, and willing to permanently change their behavior*: *Do you acknowledge that there are areas that you need to change or improve? Can you take a depersonalized look at yourself and your situation? Can you make an objective but not overly critical evaluation of your behavior? Are you convinced that you have significantly more to gain than to lose by going for your Intention? Are you willing to accept your support group's honest feedback and not be defensive or resentful?*

While the *final answers* to these questions have to come from the self-coachee, the preliminary soul-searching can take the form of a *dialogue* instead of a *monologue*. Sharing your thoughts—if asked—may spark *self-insights* in colleagues. Your follow-up questions may cause them to think deeply before answering.

Self-coaching offers a way to *enhance leader bench strength* while proving to potential leaders that you really believe that *human capital is your greatest asset*. **LE**

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