



## Create a Culture of Coaching

Many of us can recount happy memories of working our hearts out and achieving our very best with a favorite sports coach, dance teacher and the like. Yet relatively few can describe a similar experience with a boss. That seems a little unfair. The favorite coach often pushed us hard to perform, pointed out our weaknesses, and left us physically exhausted. Bosses, on the other hand, are often encouraged to be nice to us, give us an appropriate amount of work, hear our needs and in general “boost” our morale all by themselves. Why is it then, some of our happiest experiences were with a tough coach?

Dan Pink describes in his book “Drive” that, especially for those in non-routine and complex work, people feel inspired to perform at a high level when intrinsic motivators are present: two of these are mastery (getting increasingly good at something), and purpose/value. A favorite coach probably created an environment where these conditions were present. And in the workplace, great bosses do too. Here’s some of what they do:

### **1. Pick the right type of goal**

In my dance class, if I see a really advanced dance step, I will probably watch but not try. It looks too hard and I have no place to even start. On the other hand, if I’m put through endless drills on ridiculously easy steps, I’ll get bored and check out (it’s easier to leave the dance class than the job). Make sure that work goals and responsibilities are challenging enough to be stimulating, but not defeating. Look for opportunities to stretch people in their performance: (for instance working with new software, achieving a reasonably higher sales quota, running a meeting alone).

### **2. Give feedback in balance.**

Back to the dance class: I get a steady flow of feedback, both positive and corrective. This is how I grow and learn. Feedback also let’s me know I’m valued, that it is important for me to perform well. At work, remember to give regular feedback that includes both “what you’re doing well” and “what you need to correct”. I recently heard a respected leadership author (and others) suggest a ratio of 5 positive feedback comments to 1 corrective; seems a bit high to me, but how about even 2 to 1? For most managers, that would be an improvement.

### **3. Give feedback on behavior, not traits.**

Amazingly (or not) I really appreciate corrective feedback from my dance teacher, but am not so thrilled if I get it at work. One of the main differences is the teacher is focusing on my movements (behavior) and bosses often focus on judgments (opinions about the behavior). A comment such as “You’re not trying hard” doesn’t help much and makes people defensive. “Two project deadlines were missed last month” gives you a starting point to talk through to solutions. Make sure your corrective feedback starts with the person’s behavior or actions.

### **4. Teach people new important skills.**

I love to learn new dance steps, and I love to learn new skills related to my profession (it’s that mastery thing from Pink). Look for opportunities to teach people what you’re good at, or arrange for them to learn from others. Expose them to fresh or new ideas. Find out what people want to learn, and set them up for classes, or learning on the job. Make sure that what people are learning will be used now or in their future career; learning is inspiring when it has a purpose and usefulness (re-read Pink).

**5. Be optimistic and uplifting to be around.**

We look to our coaches to help us through the struggles as well as the celebrations. Be optimistic, speak well of others, and project confidence that things will turn out well. If the department is going through changes, describe your vision for the future and then help people get there.

Like the coaches, great bosses know that not everyone will have the talent or produce the necessary results in the end, and perhaps some hard choices will have to be made. But they do their part to ensure they have brought out the best in each and every one.

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