



ISSUE NO. 303

INSPIRE LEADERSHIP:

## Manager as coach

To add full value your managers need to make sure new skills their employees learn are implemented on the job and improved year-after-year. Here's how they can do it.

MARTIN C. SHANKER



**Nothing is more important to achieving lasting change in employee behavior than ongoing coaching and teaching from managers. It's up to them to provide the guidance and reinforcement needed to make new behaviors permanent.**

### **Appraising the Situation**

Ask yourself these questions to determine the kind of job your managers are doing:

- Do your managers view coaching of sales associates as an integral part of successfully driving sales? Do their rewards and promotions depend on success in this area?
- Are coaching goals set collaboratively in a way that ensures they are equally valued by the manager and the employee?
- Do managers seek first to understand, before seeking to be understood?
- Is feedback always focused on specific behaviors?
- Is feedback consistent and encouraging or occasional and critical?

### **Best Practices**

Here is what effective managers do when they coach employees:

**Have the sales associate take the lead.** The most effective coaches do more than cheerlead or critique. They establish a collaborative atmosphere in which the person being coached begins the process of setting goals and deciding how to achieve them. Rapid and lasting behavior changes occur only when an associate wants to be coached and agrees with the goals and how they will be achieved. The plan should include a time frame and specific measurements of success. Feelings of responsibility for monitoring success and behavior change need to move from the manager to the sales associate.

**Seek first to understand, before being understood.** Great coaches are great listeners. They understand the other person's perspective before communicating their message. Effective listening gives them the information needed to properly structure feedback. It also builds trust by demonstrating respect and understanding. These two qualities can transform a relationship. For example, if an associate demonstrates an interest in improving his closing ability, begin by asking him how he thinks this might best be achieved.

**Be an active listener.** The best listeners actively test for understanding. The master skill of active listening is "reflecting" or summarizing the speaker's thoughts and feelings in a nonjudgmental fashion using one's own words. Reflecting achieves two outcomes. First, it communicates understanding of what's been said, allowing

for immediate correction if needed. Second, it encourages elaboration without making the speaker feel she is being interrogated. Often, elaboration results in a deeper understanding of what prevents an employee from improving or adopting new behaviors.

**Always focus on behaviors.** Top coaches focus on concrete behaviors (e.g., “Did you ask open-ended questions to encourage the client to elaborate on needs?”) as opposed to nonspecific generalities (e.g., “Did you ask better questions this time?”) The best coaches chunk behaviors into groups. Don’t expect someone to change everything overnight. Pick a small subset of behaviors to change, and, once these have been mastered, move on to a second set.

**Encourage, rather than discourage.** A great deal of research supports the conclusion that learning occurs much more quickly with positive reinforcement as opposed to punishment. The best coaches shape the development of new behaviors through encouragement and reinforcement rather than criticisms and negative comments. They also avoid loaded phrases that can destroy the fabric of collaboration such as “If you just understood the big picture...” or “Why can’t you simply...?”

Be timely and consistent in providing feedback. The power of reinforcement declines rapidly with increasing distance from the activity it’s designed to reinforce. Work to administer feedback as closely as possible to the behavior occurrence. In addition, be consistent. The best coaches provide feedback constantly rather than waiting for a scheduled formal review.

**About Shanker Inc.**

*Martin Shanker is the founder and president of Shanker Inc., a Manhattan-based international management consulting firm for such companies as Burberry, Cartier, The Estee Lauder Companies, Ralph Lauren and Van Cleef & Arpels. Described as a 'behaviorist' by The New York Times, Martin specializes in helping global brands accelerate sales and profit by growing their companies from within. By addressing the tough issues of sales and management teams, and the behavioral dimension of retail relationships, Shanker Inc. offers a unique, multi-dimensional way for companies to achieve success through their own people.*

[martin.shanker@shankerinc.com](mailto:martin.shanker@shankerinc.com) • (866) SHANKER • [www.shankerinc.com](http://www.shankerinc.com)