LEAD*

A LEADER'S GUIDE FOR EFFECTIVE ONE-ON-ONE COACHING MEETINGS

The following is a pre-release chapter from an upcoming book by Rob Simons about building great businesses. The LEAD One-On-One Coaching process is one of the critical meeting rhythms of successful organizations. Leaders that adopt a "coaching" mindset will build a culture of accountability and execution.

Please contact Rob at rob@simons.coach with feedback about the content or stories of how the LEAD concept has impacted your organization. All feedback is appreciated.

Download additional resource related to the LEAD tool online:

ONE-ON-ONE MEETING AGENDA
https://www.simons.coach/download/one-on-one-agenda

ONE-ON-ONE MEETING TEMPALTE
https://www.simons.coach/download/one-on-one-meeting-template

WHAT'S THE SCORE? IS YOUR ORGANIZATION WINNING OR LOSING?
https://www.simons.coach/download/scorecards

SIMONS

SIMONS.COACH *
1777 NE LOOP 410, SUITE 600
SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS 78217
WWW.SIMONS.COACH
210.845.2782

LEAD: A Leader's Guide For Effective One-On-One Coaching

By Rob Simons

Make a mental list of your organization's mistakes, failures, and missed opportunities in the past year. If you traced back the root cause for each issue, what percentage of them are associated with a human being? If your experience is like mine, it's 100%.

Unless you've discovered a business model that doesn't involve people, the root cause of most organizational problems is traceable to a team member's strategy, execution, or skills. Since businesses require people, it's impractical to think that organizations can operate without problems. But it is possible to build organizations that continuously improve, and that process starts with leaders committed to consistently developing their team members.

An entrepreneur once said to me, "Leaders get the organizations they deserve." While this observation might sound a bit cold, it's true. To grow an organization, leaders must grow their people. If you don't grow your people, don't be disappointed or surprised when your organization doesn't grow. The more highly skilled and capable your team members are, the more likely you will accomplish your organization's vision. A great team will even overcome the absence of processes, systems, and structure because they know how to get stuff done. If it's not clear, your top priority as a leader is to develop your team members.

The New York Yankees are famous for recruiting the most talented and highest-paid players in Major League Baseball. Year after year, they exceed the league-imposed salary cap and pay hefty penalties for their expensive roster. They spend the money on great players because it dramatically increases the team's chances of winning a championship. As of 2020, the Yankees have competed in 40 of 116 World Series. The closest competitor is the St. Louis Cardinals with 19 appearances. And after that, most teams are in the low single digits for World Series appearances. Great team members make a difference.

It's easy to jump to the conclusion based on the Yankees to hire the most qualified, talented team members you can find, regardless of price. Unfortunately, that's not always a practical or profitable choice for organizations. Overpaying for team members is an option in a controlled monopoly like Major League Baseball, but businesses survive on profit. And irrespective of how skilled the team members are, they still need development. Another hallmark of the Yankees is they apply the same approach to hiring talented ball players to hiring great managers and coaches. Because even great team members need coaching.

The key to developing any team is to have a consistent and systematic approach for helping every team member to achieve their full potential in their role. The primary tool for accomplishing this goal is one-on-one coaching — a process for leaders to provide timely and relevant feedback to improve a team member's skills and capabilities.

Google spent a decade researching what makes a great manager at Google. One of the results of their detailed study called re:Work is the Google Manager Behaviors. The number one behavior of a great manager at Google is being "a good coach." Yet when I ask leaders how often they meet with their direct reports to improve skills and capabilities, the answer is typically one of three responses: "Never," "Rarely," or "Once a year." The last reply usually ties to the dreaded Annual Performance Review.

Let's address this head-on and bluntly – Annual Performance Reviews do not work! Providing feedback in December about a performance issue eight months ago is not helpful to you or your direct report. The world changes too fast for infrequent and vague performance feedback. Coincidentally, both the manager and the employee hate the Annual Performance Review. Yet, many companies continue to use this antiquated process.

Can you imagine any of the great Yankee's managers, Joe McCarthy, Billy Martin, Yogi Berra, Casey Stengel, or Joe Torre, giving athletes feedback only once in a season? No. All professional sports teams review "film" immediately after a game to gather input and identify improvement areas. A common refrain among the coaching community is "film doesn't lie." Timely and consistent one-on-one coaching of your direct reports is your version of reviewing the game film.

If your organization is still performing the annual performance review ritual, please stop immediately. You will learn below why regular one-on-one coaching meetings are more effective than an Annual Performance Review. Consistent one-on-one coaching will dramatically develop your team's skills and capabilities, directly leading to a more effective and profitable organization and maybe even become a "World Championship" team.

LEAD

The acronym LEAD makes it easy to remember the following four steps for effective one-on-one meetings:

1. Life Reflections
2. Evaluate the Game Film
3. Ask Questions
4. Develop a Game Plan

For each step of LEAD, you will learn why each activity is necessary, how to manage the conversation, and what's the final outcome. The first three steps of the one-on-one meeting agenda create a dialogue between the coach and the team member. These conversations will identify the improvement opportunities to help the team member learn and grow in their role. Keep notes during the meeting with possible action items for the final agenda item – Develop a Game Plan.

The Game Plan typically includes three specific actions or activities for the team member to accomplish before the next one-on-one meeting. These action items may include any of the following:

- Actions related to a strategic company priority (e.g., "Revised incentive plan presented to the sales team")
- Professional and personal development initiatives (e.g., "2 CE hours completed")
- A specific job-related activity (e.g., "Draft of the Newco proposal delivered to leadership team")

A typical one-on-one meeting takes 50 minutes or less to complete. The direct report arrives prepared by completing the One-On-One Meeting Template before the meeting. If the direct report does not come ready for the one-on-one meeting, the coach should reschedule the meeting. Likewise, the coach should prepare by reviewing notes from the previous one-on-one meeting. It's a valuable investment of time for both parties to be prepared for the meeting. Download a PDF version of the LEAD One-On-One Meeting Agenda.

The LEAD one-on-one meeting agenda is as follows:

Life Reflections
1. Personal High and Personal Low [3 Minutes]
2. Business High and Business Low [3 Minutes]

Evaluate the Game Film
3. Review Game Plan From Last Coaching Meeting [4 Minutes]
4. Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) [10 Minutes]
5. Review Personal Priorities [4 Minutes]

Ask Questions
6. Parking Lot Items [10 Minutes]
7. Coaching Questions [5 Minutes]

Develop a Game Plan
8. Capture Action Items [9 Minutes]
9. Confirm Next Meeting Date and Time [1 Minute]

SIMONS

SIMONS.COACH*
1777 NE LOOP 410, SUITE 600
SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS 78217
WWW.SIMONS.COACH
210.845.2782

© 2019 SIMONS SAYS CONSULTING, INC.
PAGE 2 OF 16

The times on the agenda are rough guides for each section. It's not uncommon for one area to take more time. Just make sure you complete all eight steps within the scheduled time. The last section, Develop a Game Plan, is essential to complete before the meeting ends. Direct reports must leave the meeting with clear action items to focus on before the next one-on-one.

A few observations about the length of time for one-on-one meetings:

- The attention span of many individuals is about an hour, making the 50-minute one-on-one meeting an effective length.
- Many leaders can complete an effective one-on-one meeting in less than 50 minutes, but it's typically with high-performing team members and the leader is an experienced coach. With time, you will shorten the length of many one-on-one meetings.
- When starting this process, it's common for the meetings to go long because of a backlog of topics to discuss. Resist the urge to go beyond the scheduled agenda and stay focused on the most important topics. You want to avoid setting an example that the one-on-one meeting can go beyond the scheduled time.
- Holding a one-on-one meeting once-a-month may actually take longer because there are more events and topics to discuss since the previous session.
- Some organizations prefer weekly one-on-one meetings. These are typically thirty minutes or less. Experiment to discover the ono-on-one meeting rhythm and duration that works well in your organization's culture.
- The ideal number of direct reports that a leader can effectively coach is between six and eight. If you have more than eight direct reports, it becomes taxing on the leader's schedule to hold productive one-on-one meetings.

1. Life Reflections

Why is this step important?
Making an authentic and genuine interpersonal connection with your direct report is an essential step of the coaching process. Unfortunately, it's also a step that many leaders don't appreciate or ignore. If you only remember one thing from this discussion, it's this – the people you are coaching are human beings with beauty, flaws, emotions, hopes, dreams, struggles, and aspirations. They're not robots, so don't treat them like machines. Use the one-on-one coaching meetings to develop an interpersonal connection and build trust.

Some people reading the above statement will have an adverse reaction to making an interpersonal connection with their direct reports. Common objections include, "But this is business, I don't have time for personal B.S." Or, "Why do I need to be friendly with my employees? I pay them to do a job." Or, my favorite, "I think business and personal lives should be kept separate." But all of these objections miss the essential point – the people that you lead are human beings. And what happens to people outside the business directly impacts their ability to perform in the business. And vice-versa, what happens to people in the business directly impacts their personal lives.

I coached a leader through a difficult time in his organization when a key member of the leadership team went through a mid-life crisis. In addition to a nasty divorce, he started drinking too much including at company events, and had an affair with a co-worker. The drama created by this situation negatively impacted the culture and performance of the team for a long time. When I asked the leader, "Did you know that his direct report was going through tough times in his marriage?" He replied emphatically, "No! I never asked. I believe in separating business from personal lives. I don't want to pry into people's personal lives." I responded, "Well, not knowing what's happening in this team member's life almost cost you your company."

How to build an interpersonal connection?
If you are uncomfortable making interpersonal connection with their direct reports, it is a very natural process. It just takes a genuine interest and caring about who they are as a person. Knowing the answer to questions like, "What does their family look like?" "Who is their spouse?" "How many children do they have?" "Where did they grow up?" "What are their hobbies?" "How do they engage in the community?" "What's important to them?" And, "What are their dreams and aspirations?"

SIMONS

SIMONS.COACH[*]
1777 NE LOOP 410, SUITE 600
SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS 78217
WWW.SIMONS.COACH
210.845.2782

© 2019 SIMONS SAYS CONSULTING, INC.
PAGE 3 OF 16

But before you think it's about asking a bunch of questions that sound like a first date, relax. You can learn all of these essential aspects by using a tool that I learned in Forum training from the [Entrepreneurs' Organization (EO)](); at every one-on-one meeting they will reflect on what's happening in their personal life since your previous one-on-one meeting by sharing a Personal High and a Personal Low. The coach's responsibility is to be genuinely curious and listen to what they're saying (and not saying.)

Agenda Item: Personal High and Personal Low [3 Minutes]

Your direct report shares their Personal High and Personal Low since the previous one-on-one meeting. When appropriate, it's your job to use that information to build an interpersonal connection with your direct report. As I wrote earlier, this skillset is very natural for many people.

I know some leaders lean towards the introverted side of the scale, and they'd prefer a root canal over getting to know someone personally. It's important to understand that successful leaders know how to connect with people on a personal level.

One important cautionary point about building an interpersonal connection with your team members – you must do it because you genuinely care about them. If you go through the motions to check off the box that you listened to their Personal High and Personal Low, you miss the point of the exercise. And more importantly, your direct reports will see that you are inauthentic. This insincere approach can be more dangerous than not building a personal connection.

Note: I'm also confident that some HR managers are going to read this and freak out about possibly breaking some HR policy about building personal connections with team members. And if you're that person, I'll remind you that the "H" in HR stands for "Human."

What is the result of building a personal connection?

To be an effective leader, you have to build trust with your team members. The best way to do that is through a genuine interpersonal connection. Pat Lencioni's foundational business book, "[The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable]()," points out that trust is the foundation of any effective team. Stephen M.R. Covey, the author of "[The Speed of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything]()," states that trust creates higher energy, higher joy, and more productivity.

And trust is built through interpersonal connections. Additionally, building trust with your direct reports is a win-win for both of you. As a leader, you have a better and more complete understanding of a team member that reports to you. And for your direct report, they see you as a leader who genuinely cares about who they are as a person.

One of my mentors, Robert Wagnon, told me, "Rob, everyone you meet in life is dealing with some epic struggle in their life that you know nothing about." Robert's observation is a reminder of the importance of being humble and kind. One practical example of this came during a one-on-one that I observed. The team member opened with a brief Personal High that seemed superficial. You could tell something troubling was on their mind. Then, they paused, and cautiously said to the coach, "My Personal Low is that my mom was diagnosed with cancer. You're the first person outside my family that I've told."

This news was an epic tragedy in this team member's life. It was a signal to the coach that work was the last thing on this person's mind. How differently would you treat a direct report if you learned that they just discovered this tragic news about a family member? Unfortunately, many leaders never know this vital information about their direct reports without a consistent rhythm to connect with team members.

I heard Pat Lencioni talk about a unique approach to hiring for a manager position. He suggests that you ask the manager candidate, "Tell me about the last team you managed, how many team members reported to you?" He would then follow up with, "Tell me the names of each one of your direct reports?" The first checkpoint in this process is to see how easily the candidate can recite back the names of their direct reports. Then, Pat suggests you randomly pick one name from the list and ask the candidate, "Now tell me

everything you know about Jane [random name from the team list] from a personal and professional perspective." Pat concludes that the best managers can quickly tell you about their strengths, weaknesses, goals, and details about their personal lives.

The result of building a Personal Connection between managers and direct reports is a highly productive team, with deeper commitment and a higher level of personal satisfaction. The amount of time you invest as a leader in developing interpersonal connections is small compared to the tremendous impact it will have on your organization.

Agenda Item: Business High and Business Low [3 Minutes]

The second half of the Life Reflections is understanding how your direct report feels about their performance at work. Interestingly, they tend to be more critical on themselves than most bosses. Similar to the interpersonal connection questions in step 1, each team member comes prepared with their Business High and Business Low since the previous one-on-one coaching meeting.

By hearing their Business High and Business Low every two weeks, you will quickly identify aspects of their job that they love and dislike. This information is essential to being an effective leader so you can direct more of the work they love to them, and possibly train them in areas where they are weak. In some cases, you might even remove work from their responsibility that they don't like to do.

Just like listening to the Personal High and Personal Low, don't hesitate to dig in a little deeper to their statement to find the root cause of a topic. For example, if a direct report says the Business High was, "Winning the new contract with Newco is awesome." You might inquire a little deeper by asking, "What is it about the Newco contract that gets you excited?" Depending on their response, you might continue to unpeel another layer with another question. Remember the "Five Whys?" Merely asking, "Why?" five times will help you get to the underlying root cause.

After getting the team member's qualitative perspective of their performance with the Business High and Business Low, it's time to look at the quantitative metrics behind their performance since their last one-on-one coaching meeting. This part of the discussion is about numbers and facts – "Film doesn't lie."

2. Evaluate the Game Film

Why is this step important?

While building an interpersonal connection, and ultimately trust, with your direct reports is essential, getting stuff done is the reason that they're on your team. Regardless of position, all team members are responsible for executing their roles and responsibilities, and the one-on-one coaching meetings are a vital leadership tool to ensure your team members are performing to their ability.

Rory McIlroy is one of the top-ranked golfers in the world. By age 30, he had achieved 27 professional wins, including four coveted major championships. His estimated net worth is over $200 million. But even at the top of his game, Rory still has a team of people to support him including, a swing coach, mental coach, fitness coach, personal chef, business manager, and caddie. Why does one of the best golfers in the world need so many people to help him? Because the competition is always getting better, so Rory can't relax if he wants to stay on top. These coaches all have the goal of making Rory the best golfer he can be.

That's your job as a leader, *make each of your direct reports the best team member they can be.* To help them achieve their full potential, they need consistent feedback. Enter the post-game film review. Your game is on the field of business.

How do you evaluate the game film?

Step one in the game film process is to review the Game Plan that was created in the previous one-on-one meeting. Great team members consistently execute their Game Plan.

Agenda Item: Review Game Plan From Last Coaching Meeting [4 Minutes]

Review each action item of the last Game Plan to confirm they were completed? If not, why? Does it still need to be completed? If yes, what actions will they take to ensure the activity gets completed before the next session? If a team member consistently fails to achieve a specific action item, consider it a flag to dig deeper. Work to identify the root cause that is preventing the team member from completing the assignment. Solve the root cause to get them back on track.

It's okay to change an action item when new information has become available since establishing the game plan. For example, a team member's action item is "10 leads captured at tradeshow event," but because of dangerous weather, the tradeshow cancels. Clearly, it's okay to change the action item. But it is not okay to change an action item because the team member doesn't want to do the work.

Gregg Popovich, legendary coach of the San Antonio Spurs, has a framed quote of Jacob Riis in the Spurs' locker room. The quote reads, "When nothing seems to help, I go back and look at the stonecutter hammering away at his rock perhaps a hundred times without as much as a crack showing in it. Yet at the hundred and first blow it will split in two, and I know it was not that blow that did it — but all that had gone before."

In coaching team members in business, the hammer blows of the stonecutter are the equivalent to a team member consistently completing their two-week action items between coaching session. The steady execution of short-term action items leads directly to achieving larger goals and objectives. Over time, this process will create a high-performing individual and team.

Agenda Item: Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) [10 Minutes]

An essential pre-requisite to this next step is ensuring that each team member knows the metrics that determine if they are winning or losing in their role. This step may sound obvious, but it's surprising how many organizations don't provide this information to team members. Some organizations use Job Descriptions; I prefer the concept of having Scorecards for each position.

(Download the article "What's the Score? Is Your Organization Winning or Losing?" for step-by-step instructions and forms to create company, departmental, and individual scorecards. https://www.simons.coach/downloads/scorecards)

While the Scorecard includes a simple job description, it goes in-depth with specific elements to hold a team member accountable for their role. The most critical aspect is three Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that the team member is responsible for achieving. The KPIs are a combination of leading and lagging indicators that align with the company's critical KPIs.

Ideally, each of the team member's KPIs have four clearly defined target ranges:

- **Super Green** – Performance above expectations, that if sustained, will lead to a promotion.
- **Green** – Performance that meets expectations
- **Yellow** – Performance below expectations that requires a performance improvement plan
- **Red** – Unacceptable performance that, if unchanged quickly, will lead to termination

The team member must be able to influence these KPIs directly. For example, a salesperson is responsible for landing new contracts. But it may be challenging to hold them accountable for those contracts to convert into revenue when the project is dependent on the operations team to execute the contract.

The KPIs should be a mix of leading and lagging indicators. It's a common mistake only to manage team members based on lagging indicators. These are metrics that happened in the past. They are essential, but it's much more impactful to measure team members on leading indicators to lead them to achieve the lagging indicators.

SIMONS

SIMONS.COACH*
1777 NE LOOP 410, SUITE 600
SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS 78217
WWW.SIMONS.COACH
210.845.2782

© 2019 SIMONS SAYS CONSULTING, INC.
PAGE 6 OF 16

Review the current metrics of the KPIs during the one-on-one coaching meeting. The direct report should come prepared to report on these KPIs and any possible action items to stay on target. If you don't have a formal Scorecard, you can still work with your team members to identify their KPIs. An action item in the first one-on-one meeting may by for the direct report to identify their KPIs and initial target range.

A job Scorecard also includes a list of the essential skills required for the position. Skills are typically subjective; for example, a salesperson needs to be a "great listener."

A list of non-negotiable responsibilities is included on the Scorecard for each position. For example, a salesperson is responsible for "Daily documentation of all conversations with clients and prospects in SalesForce." Responsibilities are black or white – they are completed, or they are not completed. There is no gray area.

The final element of a good Scorecard is the company's Core Values. All team members are expected to use the Core Values as the basis for all decision-making and actions, especially in the absence of specific policies.

The Skills, Responsibilities, and Core Values sections of the Scorecard are used in addition to KPIs when establishing personal and professional goals for a team member. I recommend working with direct reports every quarter to develop three individual quarterly priorities. These are short-term objectives that advance the team member's capabilities. If your organization has a quarterly planning rhythm, use that rhythm to develop individual priorities for your direct reports. This timing also allows you to align personal priorities with company priorities. For more information on developing a scorecard, read the article "What's the Score? Is Your Organization Winning or Losing?"

Agenda Item: Review Personal Quarterly Rocks [4 Minutes]

Review the progress on the team member's personal priorities established at the beginning of the quarter. These initiatives are often a common sources of action items to be completed before the next one-on-one meeting.

If your organization has a quarterly planning rhythm to establish targets and quarterly priorities, use this time frame to develop individual priorities for the team member that aligns with the company's priorities. For example, if the company has a Q2 priority "$10M in New Proposals Delivered," a salesperson might have an individual Q2 priority of "$1M in New Proposals Delivered."

If your organization does not have a quarterly planning rhythm, plan on spending time every 90 days to establish more significant priorities for your direct reports. These may be professional development objectives, activities directly related to their job, or special projects or initiatives. The key is to make sure they align with moving the company forward.

While it's possible to coach a direct report without a clearly defined set of expectations like a Scorecard, it is difficult. Holding someone accountable for an unknown set of expectations will lead to dysfunction and miscommunication. But instead of waiting to build a finished Scorecard for each role, you can use the one-on-one meetings to start building the Scorecard for each position.

The first personal priority for a direct report can be "Completed Scorecard for my Position." Allow your direct report to lead the effort to create their Scorecard. Within 60 to 90 days, they will have a pretty solid draft of the Scorecard, and your direct report will appreciate being part of the process to build the expectations for their role.

What is the Result of Reviewing Performance?
By reviewing the productivity and performance of your direct reports consistently, you will avoid any surprises for you or your direct reports. Many companies still use the antiquated and ineffective process of Annual Performance Reviews. Going back to my example of Rory being the best golfer in the world, imagine how different his golf skills would be if he only received feedback from his coaches once a year? It would be a disaster.

SIMONS

SIMONS.COACH*
1777 NE LOOP 410, SUITE 600
SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS 78217
WWW.SIMONS.COACH
210.845.2782

© 2019 SIMONS SAYS CONSULTING, INC.
PAGE 7 OF 16

In their book, "Peak: Secrets from the New Science of Expertise," Anders Ericsson and Robert Pool debunk the myth started by Malcolm Gladwell that it takes 10,000 hours to be an expert. As described in the book, the research shows that there is no specific timetable to become an expert. What it takes is "deliberate practice," defined as getting outside your comfort zone and expanding your skills and capabilities with the feedback and guidance of a teacher or coach.

Returning to the golf analogy, hitting one hundred golf balls on the driving range, doesn't necessarily make you a better golfer. Intentionally hitting specific types of golf shots on the driving range while making minor adjustments to your mechanics based on the feedback of a coach will definitely make you a better golfer.

Providing a consistent one-on-one coaching process for team members will eliminate the need for Annual Performance Reviews. Team members will receive ongoing feedback to learn and grow throughout the year. As I stated earlier, your goal as a leader is to make your team members the best version that they can be and providing them constant guidance and feedback will help you achieve that goal. It's your opportunity to improve their value to the company and the company becomes more valuable to the team member. It is a win-win.

Some leaders will worry about investing the time to develop their team members, only to see these team members leave to pursue an opportunity at another company. While that is a distinct possibility, it's worth considering the opposite scenario where leadership doesn't train and develop team members, and those team members stay! Again, the job of a leader is to make their direct reports the best team members they can be in their role.

If you want to learn more about this subject, I strongly recommend reading "The Alliance: Managing Talent in a Networked Age" by Reid Hoffman and Ben Casnocha. The authors make the compelling argument that the old model of guaranteed long-term employment no longer works for businesses or employees. The future of jobs is a market where employees and employers find a mutually beneficial relationship that operates in a world of continuous change. Team members contribute their skills and expertise to make the company better, and the company invests time and resources to make the team member better.

3. Ask Questions

Why is asking questions important?
A standard definition of a manager is "a person responsible for controlling or administering all or part of a company or organization." When I read that definition, I cringe at the word "controlling." It's an old-school approach to believe that a manager's job is to "control" their direct reports. Who wants a position where they are "controlled?"

In his book "Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World," General Stanley McChrystal presents the traditional method of military leadership using the mental image of a General moving pieces on a chessboard. But during the first Iraq war, he and his commanders realized that to win a war against terrorists, they needed soldiers equipped in the field to respond quickly, communicate freely, and make decisions without layers of bureaucracy. Since modern-day businesses need a similar approach to team members, we need to change our leadership approach like General McChrystal.

For leaders of teams in organizations, I prefer the term "Coach" over "Manager." As stated above, a coach's goal is to make their subject the best version they can be. It's much more holistic than a manager. The reason Rory McIlroy employees a swing coach is because the coach can see things that Rory can't see. The coach also has experience with other pupils that have similar issues. In other words, Rory doesn't have to reinvent the wheel to fix a slice or a hook. He can simply ask the coach the best way to fix it.

And my favorite part of the coaching analogy is that when Rory is on the final hole of a golf tournament needing a birdie to win, Rory is the one that has to execute. The coach is on the sidelines and can only watch. That's what happens in business. We prepare, train, and develop a team member, but when they're in front of a prospect pitching a big deal, we can't always help.

SIMONS

SIMONS.COACH*
1777 NE LOOP 410, SUITE 600
SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS 78217
WWW.SIMONS.COACH
210.845.2782

© 2019 SIMONS SAYS CONSULTING, INC.
PAGE 8 OF 16

So, if you still have the mindset of playing chess with your team members ("controlling" your direct reports), I'd like to encourage you to focus on "coaching" your direct reports instead. And a critical tool for any coach is to ask more questions by adopting the Socratic Method when working with your direct reports.

As the name implies, the Socratic Method is named after Socrates. Wikipedia describes the Socratic Method as "a form of cooperative argumentative dialogue between individuals, based on asking and answering questions to stimulate critical thinking and to draw out ideas and underlying presuppositions." Or simply stated, the method is the coach asking questions of their direct report, and the direct report asking questions of the coach. It's a way to have productive dialogue.

Using the Socratic Method, a coach can allow their direct report to discover the proper answers or approach based on broad, open-ended questions instead of factual information. Instead of telling your team members what to do (aka "controlling" them), you teach them to think critically and answer their own questions. As the old proverb says, "Give a man a fish, and he will eat for a day. Teach a man how to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime."

How do you ask questions in coaching?
To use the Socratic Method in business coaching, you ask questions instead of giving the subject the answer. Asking questions is a great tool to clarify the root cause of an issue. A coach spends the majority of their time helping team members identify the root cause of an issue. If a team member doesn't know the real problem, it's hard for them to locate a solution.

The solution to vague and unclear issues is to ask questions. Sometimes even the simplest of questions, like "Why?" is all you need.

Let's look at some sample coaching questions:

- "What do you want to accomplish by <insert vague priority here>?" For example, "What do you want to accomplish by 'focusing on your Quickbook skills?'"
- "What does it mean to <insert vague priority here>?" For example, "What does it mean to 'become quicker at closing deals?'"
- "What is the end goal of <insert vague priority here>?" For example, "What is the end goal of 'accelerating our marketing program?'"
- "What is the specific deliverable you will have achieved with <insert vague priority here>?" For example, "What is the specific deliverable you will have achieved by getting better at cold calls?"

Similar to asking "Why?" five times, this technique allows a coach to peel back the layers of the onion to reveal the core issue. Even asking the same question, again and again, will help unpack the true deliverable at the heart of the objective.

One of the hardest parts of coaching in this method is to let the direct report find the answer. Sometimes that means being quiet after asking the question and allowing the direct report to formulate their response. Don't be surprised if there are some long and awkward silences in the room while they search for the answer. Resist the urge to jump in and answer it for them. Your job is to ask questions.

A coaching conversation to identify the real objective of a plan might look like the following:

Coach: "What's the one area where you need to improve over the next 90 days?"

Direct Report: "I want to focus on my Quickbook skills." (Note: "Focus on" is a vague statement. Whenever you hear vague statements, ask questions to clarify.)

Coach: "So help me understand, what do you want to accomplish by focusing on your Quickbook skills?"

SIMONS

SIMONS.COACH*
1777 NE LOOP 410, SUITE 600
SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS 78217
WWW.SIMONS.COACH
210.845.2782

© 2019 SIMONS SAYS CONSULTING, INC.
PAGE 9 OF 16

Direct Report: "I just need to be faster at Quickbooks." (Note: "Faster" as another vague statement.)

Coach: "But, what does it mean to be faster at Quickbooks?"

Direct Report: "Basically, I'm stressed out at the end of the month because it takes so long to close the books."

Coach: "Why is that stressing you out?"

Direct Report: "Because everybody is waiting on the month-end numbers, so I feel pressure to stay late and work weekends. My family isn't happy about how long I work at the end of the month." (Note: As a coach, make notes of the deeper emotional needs of the team member they just stated. These emotions are essential to help motivate someone to achieve their goals.)

Coach: "Now we are getting somewhere. Let me confirm; you desire to close the books without stress. Correct?"

Direct Report: "Yes."

Coach: "Let's start with the current state of closing the books: How long does it take you to close the books today?"

Direct Report: "It usually takes me about seven days of non-stop focused work to get the monthly books ready for the leadership team."

Coach: "How long do you think it should take you to close the books?"

Direct Report: "If I structured the month with time to make weekly updates to the books, I should be able to close the books in 2 days."

Coach: "Based on what you just said, what do you believe is the specific deliverable for this objective?"

Direct Report: "The monthly books are closed in 2 days."

Coach: "That's a solid goal. If you can close the books in 2 days, will that relieve your stress?"

Direct Report: "Definitely. And it will make my family happy, too."

It's essential to reinforce the statement made earlier; a good leader uses coaching versus dictating the answer. It would be simple to tell your direct report what the goal should be. In the above example, a good manager probably knew that the real issue was the amount of time to close the books. They could have just jumped to the solution. But in the long-term, it's more important to get the buy-in of the owner to be invested in the plan. As a result, leading them to define the goal will make them more accountable to accomplishing it. It also teaches them an essential skill that they can apply to future situations.

The formula to successfully complete a goal is the following:

Successful Goal = Game Plan * Owner Buy-In

It doesn't matter how great your plan is, if you have zero buy-in from the owner, it will never be successful.

SIMONS

SIMONS.COACH*
1777 NE LOOP 410, SUITE 600
SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS 78217
WWW.SIMONS.COACH
210.845.2782

© 2019 SIMONS SAYS CONSULTING, INC.
PAGE 10 OF 16

Let's look at one more example of how a Socratic Coaching conversation might occur, but this time in a tense situation:

Coach: "Bob, I need to talk to you about your attendance at our morning stand-up meeting. Are you aware that there's a problem?"

Bob: "Not really. I've been late a few times, but I still get my work done."

Coach: "How do you think it affects the team when you're late for our morning stand-up meeting?"

Bob: "I don't think it's a big issue. I guess I never thought about it."

Coach: "What are the possible negative implications of you not being at the daily stand-up?"

Bob: "I guess I might miss some important information from my team members."

Coach: "True. What else?"

Bob: "I don't have a chance to update my team members on important next steps in my projects."

Coach: "Yes. Anything else?"

Bob: [Long silence] "My teammates may not think I'm as engaged as I should be if I don't show up to meetings on time."

Coach: "That's true, too. And if you miss your project deadline this quarter, I will have to replace you with a project manager that can be on time. Is that clear?" (Note: It's essential to be direct about the impact of the issue.)

Bob: "Yes."

Coach: "So, what causing you to be late for the morning stand-up meeting?"

Bob: "It's just traffic. Some days are worse than others. And I pass several school zones to get to work. I'm not late in the summer when school is out."

Coach: "What can you do to avoid traffic and get to the morning stand-up meeting on time?"

Bob: "I don't think there's a different route I can take, but I could leave the house a little earlier."

Coach: "How much earlier?"

Bob: "Maybe 15 minutes earlier."

Coach: "Will leaving 15 minutes early ensure that you arrive at the office on time every day for the daily stand-up?" (Note: Always take the time to summarize the issue and the solution succinctly.)

Bob: "Maybe I need to make it 30 minutes earlier."

SIMONS

SIMONS.COACH[*]
1777 NE LOOP 410, SUITE 600
SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS 78217
WWW.SIMONS.COACH
210.845.2782

© 2019 SIMONS SAYS CONSULTING, INC.
PAGE 11 OF 16

Coach: "So, what do you need to make sure you leave 30 minutes earlier?"

Bob: "I guess I just need to get out the door faster." (Note: This is a vague response that's hard to hold someone accountable for doing. What is 'faster?' Push back to make the action more black and white. You want an activity that they achieved or did not achieve.)

Coach: "What measurable action can you take to make sure you're getting out the door faster?"

Bob: "I could set my alarm 30 minutes earlier."

Coach: "That sounds like a good plan. What time is your alarm currently set for?"

Bob: "6:30 am."

Coach: "When you get home tonight, set your alarm for 6:00 am, and let's see if that works. Okay?"

Bob: "Yes."

Claire Lew, CEO of [Know Your Team](#), summarized in a [blog post](#) 16 great coaching questions to ask during one-on-one meetings:

1. What do you see as the underlying root cause of the problem?
2. What are the options, potential solutions, and courses of action you're considering?
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each course of action?
4. How would you define success in this scenario?
5. How do you know you will have been successful?
6. What would the worst possible case outcome be?
7. What's the most likely outcome?
8. Which part of the issue or scenario seems most uncertain, befuddling, and difficult to predict?
9. What have you already tried?
10. What is your initial inclination for the path you should take?
11. Is there another solution that isn't immediately apparent?
12. What's at stake here, in this decision?
13. Is there a more natural way to do what you suggested?
14. What would happen if you didn't do anything at all?
15. Is this an either/or choice, or is there something you're missing?
16. Is there anything you might be explaining away too quickly?

Adopting the Socratic Method during coaching takes time and practice. But it's worth the commitment to help your direct reports become the best version of themselves.

Agenda Item: Parking Lot Items [10 Minutes]

Up until this point in the meeting, the focus of the one-on-one meeting is primarily about performance (action-items, KPIs, and individual priorities.) Now, it's important for both the coach and the direct report to ask questions about any additional issues in the "parking lot." This section provides flexibility to cover any pressing matters.

SIMONS

SIMONS.COACH*
1777 NE LOOP 410, SUITE 600
SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS 78217
WWW.SIMONS.COACH
210.845.2782

© 2019 SIMONS SAYS CONSULTING, INC.
PAGE 12 OF 16

What's on your mind?

In his book, "[The Coaching Habit: Say Less, Ask More & Change The Way You Lead Forever,](#)" Michael Bungay Stinger presents the prefect opening question, "What's on your mind?" While it's a simple question, it carries considerable weight. It's also very open-ended. For starters, the question doesn't constrain itself to just the workplace. A team member's top thought on their mind may be about a personal situation that is distracting them. If that's the case, it's essential as a coach to understand the situation.

The question is very open-ended and non-threatening. The respondent can say anything that they want. It's a simple tool to start a conversation that is important to the direct report. Michael suggests using this question as a starting place to dig deeper to determine how you can coach them.

Depending on the depth of the response to "What's on your mind?", Michael suggests a powerful follow-up question, "And what else?" Asking this follow up question several times will ensure that you have unpacked any concerns or issues on the mind of your direct report.

Do you have any Parking Lot topics?

The Parking Lot is a tool commonly used when facilitating meetings. The concept is that when a subject comes up, that wasn't on the agenda, but it is essential, we place it in the Parking Lot. Many times, these critical Parking Lot topics will derail the meeting and prevent the team from achieving the meeting objectives. By writing these topics on a whiteboard or easel pad, we move them to the Parking Lot. If the team completes the meeting agenda with time to spare, the team can address the Parking Lot items or move them to the agenda of a future meeting.

All team members should keep a Parking Lot of topics to bring up at their next meeting with a coach. These are typically essential topics, but not urgent. They don't need to be addressed right away, but they should be discussed at the appropriate time. This part of the one-on-one agenda is perfect for these topics that have come up since the previous one-on-one meeting.

Be careful not to let these topics derail the purpose of the one-on-one meeting. If these Parking Lot topics require more than one session, it's okay to prioritize them for future meetings. It's also okay to schedule a separate, longer meeting to address any complex or difficult Parking Lot topics.

If a team member consistently doesn't have any Parking Lot items, that might be an indication that they are merely not tracking them, or they are disengaged. Most team members have issues that arise from time to time that they need to address with leadership.

Agenda Item: Coaching Questions [5 Minutes]

Up until this point in the meeting, the focus of the one-on-one meeting is primarily about performance (action-items, KPIs, and individual priorities.) Now, it's important for both the coach and the direct report to ask questions about any additional issues in the "parking lot." This section provides flexibility to cover any pressing matters.

The three critical questions that a coach should ask in every one-on-one meeting:

1. **What obstacles are preventing you from accomplishing your goals?**
2. **What concerns do you have about communications?**
3. **Is there anything else on your mind?**

Let's break down these questions into more detail.

SIMONS

SIMONS.COACH*
1777 NE LOOP 410, SUITE 600
SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS 78217
WWW.SIMONS.COACH
210.845.2782

© 2019 SIMONS SAYS CONSULTING, INC.
PAGE 13 OF 16

What obstacles are preventing you from accomplishing your goals?

Similar to the first question, "Do you have any obstacles?" is intended to be very open-ended. As their coach, one essential responsibility is to remove obstacles from the path of your direct reports. Many times, the barriers are more perception than reality. It is typically a signal that they need coach, not necessarily direct involvement of the coach.

Ryan Holiday, author of "[The Obstacle Is the Way: The Timeless Art of Turning Adversity to Advantage](#)," said it clearly, "The obstacle in the path becomes the path. Never forget, within every obstacle is an opportunity to improve our condition."

By asking at every one-on-one meeting if the team member has any obstacles, you avoid any future excuses like, "I didn't have the right software to create the budget." It's also reassuring to team members that they always have an opportunity to brings barriers to the attention of leadership.

One warning, always avoid asking a variation to this question, "How can I help you?" By stating that you're willing to 'help' your direct report, you are giving them the license to assign you some of their work. People can manipulate the meaning of 'help' is to be many things. It's also an excuse, "You told me you were going to help me…" Remember that your job is to help them remove their obstacles, not do their work.

What concerns do you have about communications?

Consistently the most common complaints I see on team surveys are about communications. All team members want to be kept in the loop. Many times, team member's concerns about communications are about misperceptions or a lack of expectations.

The question is intentionally open-ended about where the communication concerns exist. They could be within a team or department, company-wide issues, external communications with clients, or concerns with a specific team member.

If you receive concerns about communications, take them seriously. Remember that feedback about communications is often personal and based on their unique perspective. I see many leaders tend to write-off communication concerns. Leaders will complain, "I send my team members detailed emails with all the information they need, but they just don't read them." While that might be true, there is a deeper reason why they're not reading the email. Maybe you're delivering the right content but on the wrong channel.

Is there anything else on your mind?

By this point in the agenda any critical issues should have been brought out into the open, but it's worth asking one last time. Depending on the individual and the trust level between the coach and direct report, some people may need additional prodding about any outstanding issues. The ultimate goal is to ensure that the direct report leaves feeling they could voice any outstanding issues.

What is the result of asking questions?

To summarize a leader's approach to the Socratic Method, stop telling your direct reports what to do, and start asking them questions about what they need to do. In the beginning, this process will take longer than simply handing down explicit instructions, like moving pieces on the chessboard. In the long run, you will create more engaged team members that are more skilled at solving their problems.

In battle, General McChrystal concluded that having smaller, engaged, and informed teams is better than having a large group of blind followers. In successful organizations, we align and train our team members to be the best contributors to our company.

Some people may be thinking, "This Socratic stuff sounds great in principle, but what if I have a team member that can't solve their problems without me telling them what to do?" In my experience, most human beings are more talented than we first believe. The natural tendency of many leaders is to see a problem and fix it ourselves. This act produces short-term results but doesn't help us achieve long-term, sustained success.

SIMONS

SIMONS.COACH*
1777 NE LOOP 410, SUITE 600
SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS 78217
WWW.SIMONS.COACH
210.845.2782

© 2019 SIMONS SAYS CONSULTING, INC.
PAGE 14 OF 16

If a team member has been told what to do their entire career, it may be a significant change for them to learn and act independently suddenly. But with patience and commitment, a coach can have a considerable impact on their lives. And in the rare case that you have a team member incapable of solving their problems, you have to ask yourself if have the right skills to grow your company.

4. Develop a Game Plan

Why as developing a Game Plan important?
As I stated earlier, a good coach's objective is to make each of their direct reports the best version of themselves. To do this, the team member will need to improve in certain areas and skills. This growth can only occur if the team member is held accountable for the changes they agree to make. The Game Plan is the tool used to hold people accountable.

The Game Plan contains three measurable priorities to be completed before the next one-on-one meeting. The coach and the subject identify these priorities during the one-on-one meeting. The coach may occasionally check-in between the one-on-one meetings to make sure their direct report is on track to complete their Game Plan.

Without a Game Plan, the one-on-one meeting is simply a discussion without any outcomes. Each coaching session must end with action items. Otherwise, it's impossible to measure the productivity and progress of the direct report.

How do you make a Game Plan?
With a consistent rhythm of one-on-one coaching every two weeks, the typical size of the Game Plan is three priorities. Each of the individual priorities will take approximately two weeks to complete. If an action item can be completed in one or two hours, it's not a big enough goal. If an action item takes longer than two weeks to complete, break down into smaller chunks.

During the one-on-one meeting, both the coach and the subject should be keeping notes of possible action items. The agenda presents different topics and issues that may reveal the areas that need focus and accountability with action items. At this point in the agenda, the coach and their direct report have covered the following topics:

- Personal High and Personal Low
- Business High and Business Low
- Previous Action Items
- Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)
- Quarterly Rocks
- Parking Lot
- Coaching Questions

Each of these areas will present possible areas where the team member may need to improve or focus. They may also identify patterns that apply to many areas to address with specific training or activities.

Agenda Item: Capture Action Items [10 Minutes]

Working together, the coach and the subject compare their notes captures during the one-on-one meeting. Most often, there are more than just three options, and the challenge is to narrow it down to the top three action items.

Identify the three action items and make sure they have clear, measurable objectives. One way to make sure they're clear is to write them as if they've already happened. What is the future state of a specific action item? Instead of defining the action item as "Create, develop, and execute a plan to generate five new prospects," state it as "Five new prospects in the pipeline." The latter version is more

SIMONS

SIMONS.COACH*
1777 NE LOOP 410, SUITE 600
SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS 78217
WWW.SIMONS.COACH
210.845.2782

© 2019 SIMONS SAYS CONSULTING, INC.
PAGE 15 OF 16

comfortable to say it has been achieved with black and white clarity. The first version has unnecessary language. It's not essential to 'create, develop, and execute a plan,' it's important to have five prospects.

The coach will clarify the action items with their direct report. For example, "Let me confirm, you have agreed to complete the following three action items... Correct?" Use a tool to record these action items in a place where they can be easily accessed. Many organizations have a task-based project management system that can track the progress of these priorities.

Agenda Item: Confirm Next One-On-One Meeting Date And Time [1 Minute]

Confirm the date and time of the next one-on-one meeting. Make sure the meeting is on the calendar of the coach and the direct report. Finally, the coach should thank the direct report for their time and engagement.

What is the result of the Game Plan?

Having three Action Items come out of the one-on-one meeting provides a tool to hold the team member accountable. Clear, measurable goals offer a way to track the performance and progress of a team member.

--

Rob Simons is a coach, facilitator, and storyteller – a unique fusion of skills that makes him uniquely equipped to coach entrepreneurs and business leaders to scale organizations. Using the Rockefeller Habits and Simple Numbers as his foundation, Rob has successfully trained hundreds of clients to build a culture of purpose, alignment, and accountability in organizations across a variety of industries. Contact Rob at rob@simons.coach or 210-845-2782.

SIMONS

SIMONS.COACH*
1777 NE LOOP 410, SUITE 600
SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS 78217
WWW.SIMONS.COACH
210.845.2782

© 2019 SIMONS SAYS CONSULTING, INC.
PAGE 16 OF 16