

COACHING FOR CATALYSTS:

Creating Great Coaching Moments

By Lisa Haneberg

Great coaching is about creating a developmental conversation in the moment, when requested by a learner. The following tips will teach you how to be a coaching catalyst in your organization.

When thinking about what distinguishes great from poor coaching, I remember a conversation I overheard early in my career. I was 20 years old, with an ego that outpaced my accomplishments by a long shot (in other words, I was a normal 20-year-old). I am going to call the performer “Jack” and the coach “Jill.” Jack was the controller, and Jill was the front desk manager in the large hotel where we all worked. I was the assistant food and beverage director.

Jack wanted to implement a new system for purchase orders, but his ideas were not being received well by the other managers. Jack asked Jill to listen to the plan and help brainstorm ways to make the plan better for all involved. At first, Jill seemed reluctant to comment or criticize, but then she started asking great questions that led Jack to reflect on and share the reasons the other managers had concerns. Jill had her own opinions, but what Jack needed was someone to help him see what he already knew, which was that his plan

would not succeed unless he became more flexible and accommodating.

I can remember thinking that if Jack would have asked me for advice, I would have jumped right in and told him what needed to be changed and why—which was not what he needed. Jack asked for and was responsive to Jill’s thoughts and questions. Jill resisted giving advice and listened well.

After the coaching conversation, Jack was highly motivated to change his purchase order proposal, and the new plan was well received by the management

team. The coaching conversation was brief and effective—yet it was intimate, deep, and provocative.

What is coaching?

Coaching is a service that we have the opportunity to provide when performers seek our assistance. It occurs as a conversation that could be done in person, over the phone, in writing, or through other connections. The service of coaching might look like many things, depending on the varying needs and requests of the performer. Sometimes coaching feels like being a scout on a nature expedition—where we are asked to share what we see, hear, and think about something from our vantage point. Coaching might also look and feel like attending a concert, where our main role is to listen and let the performers share their interpretations. Very often, the work of a coach is that of a puzzle master—with our job being to notice the pieces, make observations, and ask questions that help performers

bring together their vision, goals, and ways forward.

Like snowflakes, every coaching moment is unique. Here's the bottom-line definition: Coaching is a developmental conversation requested, welcomed, and driven by the performer that enables her to better achieve her goals.

On the basis of my definition of coaching, its purpose should be clear—coaching needs to help the performer move forward in some small or big way. Great coaching fuels performers with inspiration, new ideas, clarity, short-cuts, focus, knowledge, or some combination of these types of progress.

Coaches as catalysts

You are striding through the woods down a rocky, unpaved, and meandering footpath. Rain has made the trail muddy, and a whipping wind is uprooting saplings and cracking off branches that are falling in your way. The sun peeks through the green canopy on occasion. As you walk, hike, jog, or slog—your speed changes with the conditions—you cycle through feelings of optimism, success, “stuckness,” and weariness. The path seems longer than you had imagined, and you wonder if you will make it to your destination.

Then something happens that speeds you forward. You discover a shortcut. Someone helps you over the boulder. You find the perfect hiking stick. The sunlight leads you to an open patch where you can adjust your bearings. The fog lifts, and the way is clear. Something happens that makes your journey easier—you experience a catalyst.

Great coaching catalyzes light-bulb—or “aha!”—moments. Strictly speaking, a catalyst is a substance that increases the rate of a chemical reaction. Although they participate in reactions, catalysts are neither consumed by nor incorporated into the products of the reactions. There is just as much catalyst at the end of the reaction as there was at the beginning. In most cases, only small amounts of catalysts are needed to increase reaction rates.

Catalysts work by providing easier

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ways for reactions to occur. A good analogy is a bridge over a valley. Without the bridge, it might be possible to cross the valley by driving down one twisting road and then back up another. But the bridge allows the valley to be crossed more quickly and with less energy. It does not reduce the amount of energy needed to drive down one side and up the other, but instead it offers an alternate way to achieve the same results while using less energy.

People can be catalysts, too. You have likely served as a catalyst for someone this week. Great coaches are, above all else, catalysts—they help people scoot forward by making things easier. A jolt of inspiration or clarity propels them into action, conversation, or further examination and fuels their efforts.

How can we learn to be catalysts? How can we develop more catalytic conversational skills? I have studied and written about the nature of

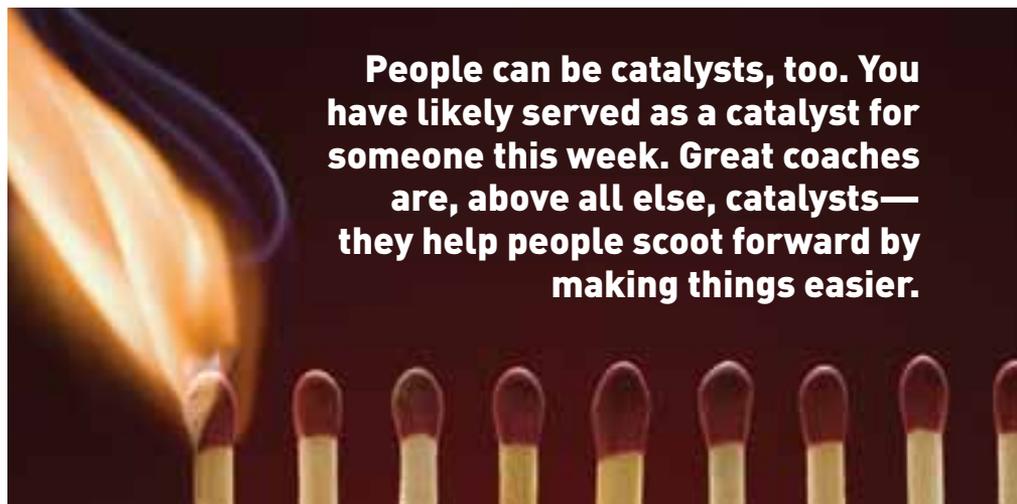
breakthroughs and catalysts, and have found four simple ways for coaches to become better catalysts:

- Be curious.
- Be proactive.
- Be observant.
- Be courageous.

Be curious. The more you encourage your natural curiosity, the more likely that you will be able to catalyze transformation. I see a strong connection between curiosity, coaching, and learning because learning happens in layers. The outer layer is the surface, and that's the kind of learning that occurs in many training sessions. As we go deeper, learning becomes much more personal and connective—connecting to work, interests, problems, and passions. Curiosity is one vehicle we can use to go deeper. We keep hiking because we are curious about what's around the next bend. We keep listening because we are curious about where the conversation is heading.

We ask more questions because we are curious about how the performer will respond. Let your curiosity flourish. Ask open-ended questions about what things mean and how they operate. Take an interest in understanding why and how things work. Your questions—your curiosity—might open up a whole new way of thinking or approach for the performer.

Be proactive. It's tough to be a catalyst if you are not proactive. Listen and respond to what performers are say-



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ing—and to what they obviously are not saying. Challenge the performer by stepping the conversation up to the next level of intimacy, complexity, or controversy. Take the initiative to offer uncommon interpretations of the situation. Don't take months to offer your support—the performer might need you today! Take the initiative to put the right people together in a conversation. Do whatever it takes to be responsive and helpful.

Be observant. I have known too many professionals who failed to see what was happening in their immediate work environment—they were not observant. To be a great catalyst, you have to notice what's going on. Keep up with current events, trends, and feelings by being in the company of others—eat lunch in the break room, participate in informal conversations, arrive at meetings a few minutes early to get in on the pre-meeting chatter, and invite your peers to

regular informal discussions over lattes down at the corner coffee shop. Notice the topics and behaviors (and perhaps people) that tend to engage or disengage meeting participants. Notice the major obstacles within the organization, and offer to help obliterate them. Share your observations in ways that stimulate the performer's input and interest—that create a pull situation.

Be courageous. This next way of being a catalyst is the one I see the least. Great coaches are courageous people—they have to be, because that's how we make the greatest difference. Courage plays a big part in creating great dialogue, because it's often what's not being said that needs to be said. Do you let discussions ride on the surface, or do you ask that one question—the tough question—that will turn the conversation upside down and get the performer nervously engaged? Having courage is not really risky; but you might find it

uncomfortable or scary. Tension is not always a bad thing—it means that we are thinking and feeling.

Very small amounts of these behaviors can speed the progress of your conversations with performers. Be a catalyst today, and make something happen.

The preceding is an excerpt from *Coaching Up and Down the Generations* by Lisa Haneberg (ASTD Press, 2010).

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