

Features

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Professional Development That Pays Off

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Here's a hard truth: Investing in your team's professional development doesn't always pay off. After more than a decade of working with organizations—from family businesses and small companies to nonprofits and large institutions—I've seen varying results. Some initiatives reap rewards, while others fall flat.

What makes the difference? In this article, we'll look at best practices for two common investments companies make in their people: one-on-one coaching and offsites. Done well, these are two effective ways to help

employees feel re-energized, supported, and more connected to the people and purpose that make great teams successful.

One-on-One Coaching

Maximize your ROI on Private coaching with these five tips:

1. Make sure the employee actually wants coaching

To do this, make coaching a benefit employees apply for, not something they receive by default.

One of the biggest mistakes I see organizations make is automatically assigning coaching at a certain level of seniority or using it as a solution for underperformance. A promotion doesn't necessarily mean someone has goals they want support with, and performance issues are often better addressed through direct feedback and performance management.

Coaching delivers the greatest return when it's offered to employees who genuinely want additional support because they're pursuing meaningful—and often daunting—goals. They understand that reaching new levels of success requires stepping outside their comfort zone and navigating new challenges (new levels, new devils, I like to say!).

Because these employees have a clear reason for engaging in coaching, they're far more likely to apply what they learn between sessions. And that application is what ultimately drives results for both the employee and the organization.

2. Jump-start success with the right questions

Before coaching formally begins—or as part of the coaching application process—ask employees to reflect on what they hope to gain from the experience by answering a few simple questions:

- What kind of leader do I want to become?
- What challenges am I facing?
- What opportunities excite me?
- What is standing between me and my goals?

This simple exercise creates ownership of the coaching process while providing a valuable opportunity for self-reflection and increased self-awareness. A copy of the employee's responses can be shared with the coach before the kick-off session to help accelerate progress.

3. Select coaches carefully

Coaching used to be the Wild West—anyone could call themselves a coach, regardless of training or experience. Today, one of the most recognized credentialing bodies is the International Coaching Federation (ICF), which offers multiple levels of certification.

If you want to ensure a baseline level of coaching competency, choose a coach with a Professional Certified Coach (PCC) credential or higher. These coaches have completed extensive training, passed written assessments, had their coaching evaluated and accumulated significant coaching experience. While credentials aren't everything, they do provide a useful benchmark for quality and professionalism. Equally important is fit.

Whenever possible, allow employees to participate in selecting their coach. Coaching works best when people trust their coach and feel invested in the relationship.

Some organizations provide a roster of approved coaches and allow employees to choose. Others allow employees to propose a coach for approval, which has the added benefit of creating a growing list of coaches with proven track records. Either approach often produces stronger results than assigning a coach without employee input.

4. Protect confidentiality

For coaching to be effective, employees must feel safe discussing challenges, fears, frustrations, ambitions and growth areas honestly.

Before coaching begins, clearly define what information will and will not be shared with the organization. In my experience, the organization only needs to know whether the employee is attending sessions, following through on commitments and actively engaging in the process—not the details of what's discussed.

At the conclusion of the engagement, the coach and employee can co-create a high-level summary of outcomes. This allows the organization to celebrate progress and reinforce accountability while preserving the confidentiality that makes coaching effective.

5. Invite employees to share their learning

One of the most effective ways to deepen learning is to teach. At the conclusion of a coaching engagement—or at regular intervals throughout—invite coached employees to share key takeaways with the rest of the team.

They might discuss a leadership habit they developed, a communication tool they found helpful or a mindset shift that improved their effectiveness. This not only reinforces the employee's learning, but also allows the organization to benefit from insights gained through the coaching process.

Strategies for Offsites

The following tips will help ensure your offsites support team morale, key deliverables and organizational growth:

1. Ask employees what would make it worthwhile

One of the best ways to increase buy-in is to involve employees in shaping the experience. As you're planning, ask: "What would make this your most valuable professional experience of the year?" If employees are giving up time with their families or stepping away from important work, the experience should feel meaningful.

2. Location matters

Changing the environment changes the conversation. One reason offsites can be so powerful is that they remove people from the routines and distractions of everyday work. When employees step into a different setting, they often think differently, interact differently and generate new ideas.

Fortunately, this doesn't require an extravagant budget. I've facilitated impactful retreats in coworking spaces, private homes and even meeting rooms at local coffee shops.

3. The magic is in the downtime

I've led offsites across the world and one thing is remarkably consistent: Many of the most memorable moments happen after the formal programming ends.

As people are sitting around the fire pit or just chatting after dinner, unexpected synergies and conversations emerge. You discover the quiet operations manager is actually hilarious, the company owner shares a vulnerable story or a new employee finds common ground with a senior leader. These moments build empathy, trust and belonging in ways Zoom calls simply cannot.

4. Beauty and fun matter

When people associate company gatherings with positive emotions, they're more likely to engage fully and build stronger connections with one another. This can be accomplished through simple touches: fresh flowers, a thoughtful meal instead of takeout or a group game to kick off the day.

Also consider a secret weapon: surprises. They can inject a burst of energy, gratitude and excitement into an offsite. I've seen companies delight employees with goodie bags, 20-minute chair massages and handwritten notes from the CEO.

5. Hire an outside facilitator

When a manager or executive runs an offsite, they often have to divide their attention between facilitating and participating. An external facilitator allows everyone—including leadership—to engage fully in the experience while reducing power dynamics that can make employees hesitant to speak openly.

A skilled facilitator can guide conversations, create psychological safety, manage group dynamics, surface important issues and keep the group focused on the objectives of the gathering. Most importantly, leaders get to participate alongside everyone else rather than carrying responsibility for the agenda.

The Bigger Picture

At their best, both coaching and offsites create something that's increasingly rare in today's workplace: space.

They create the breathing room to think strategically, build key relationships and uncover opportunities that might otherwise go unnoticed in the hustle of everyday work. When employees have that kind of space, they become more self-aware, more connected to one another and better equipped to navigate challenges and opportunities alike.

That's what transforms professional development from an expense into an investment. **GP**

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