

Coaching Champions - How to get the Absolute Best Out of Your Salespeople.

A Book Review by Dr Gerard McMahon

"No-one is so good that they can't get better". These words of wisdom from the golfer Nick Faldo open a new book on performance coaching published by Oak Tree press. The authors, Frank Salisbury, Cariona Neary and Karl O'Connor, main thesis is that every employee has it within themselves to deliver a personal performance of excellence way beyond their current levels of aspiration. They should know what they are talking about. Their combined working lives amount to seventy years of human resource, training, sales and marketing experience.

In their 264 page book the authors make a strong case for managers, and in particular sales managers, to embrace the concept of coaching when managing employees. They define coaching as "the release of latent talent and skills, previously untapped by training, through a process of self awareness initiated by the coach". The book draws lessons and analogies from the world of sport and the arts. Performers in sports and arts reach new heights of performance by working closely with their coaches.

In referring to some of the recent Irish sporting success stories, the book cites what champion coaches Brian Kerr has achieved with the Irish youth soccer teams, Declan Kidney with the Munster rugby team and Liam Griffin with the Wexford hurling team of 1996. These sports coaches helped their teams to understand their individual strengths and weaknesses and agreed action plans with players to improve. The authors argue that there are many similarities in the business world but bemoan the fact that in selling, for example, quite often there is only lip service paid to the need for coaching.

They have a case. For many managers it is easier to tell employees what to do than to empower them through a structured process of coaching to take responsibility for their actions. As a result in many organizations, sales people come and go, pressurised by targets. They often fall short of delivering levels of output which are set by sales managers.

I agree with their conclusion that it is the manager who can make the critical difference. If the manager is in coaching mode he can unlock the potential of his performers. This is the basic premise of the book. Yet as the Cranfield/University of Limerick study showed in the mid 1990s, despite the growing evidence in support of coaching and its critical contribution to strategic employee development, there has been a reluctance in Irish organizations to embrace this developmental methodology. The time needed for coaching people is perceived to be one of the main stumbling blocks for managers. To counter this argument, the authors make the case that managers who successfully coach find it indispensable and spend approximately 60% of their time coaching.

A useful Coach in Action chapter is included which brings alive for the reader situations where coaching performers worked well. One organisation cited the bottom line sales results improved by an impressive 26% after the regional managers introduced one to one coaching.

The book reads well and should become an essential part of the sales manager's toolkit. It provides a chapter on different types of coaching record forms which will prove very useful to new coaches tracking the development of performers. For human resource and training professionals, I would also commend it as it promotes a developmental approach which complements training and offers a professional way to help you transfer knowledge and skills back on the job.

The POWER coaching model as described in the book provides examples of high impact questions. It introduces a methodology which will help the training professional to work more closely with line management. Both should have the same goal leading to more productive people and an improved return on investment. Human resource specialists who have been reluctant to coach in the past take heed of the final chapter quote from the tennis sports coach Tim Gallwey. He wrote: "the opponent inside one's head is more formidable than the one on the other side of the net".