



Using Coaching as a Superpower

By Michael Brainard
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Different levels of talent respond differently to coaching. While this seems obvious, it's critical to understand the real and perceived performance level of the team members with whom we work. Segmenting teams into A, B, and C performance levels will enable you to give feedback at the appropriate time and frequency.

Oftentimes “A players” have minimal resistance, a higher level of self-awareness, and the ability to be self-critical; ultimately, allowing the coachee to get into the meat of the issues and challenge and change behavior much more quickly.

Where coaching takes a harder turn is working with high-potential leaders that are younger in their careers or B and C players. These individuals often have well-defined and mature defense mechanisms. This doesn't mean they are not capable of being challenged or changing their performance. It simply means that it doesn't happen as quickly.

This is where coaching can be your SUPERPOWER. Take the position of a coach and identify the level of defense that will be accompanying the person and be disciplined in giving them feedback. Their defensiveness is usually correlated with the individual's performance level.

Once you understand how defensive they may be, then you can attempt to diagnose their “go-to” type of defense mechanisms. For example, highly capable, technical individuals, who are rough around the edges, suffer from a similar pattern of defenses—where externalizing and blaming become their shield and armor.

When I am in this situation as a coach, I often use one of three techniques to help that person begin to challenge their externalizing.

1. I simply state the obvious. I actually count the number of times they will blame and put blame onto a person or the external environment. By the end of a coaching session or two I might hold up a mirror and say, "I've been listening carefully, and it seems that nothing is your fault, but four or five times, the environment or another person has been at fault."
2. The second technique I like to use is send the defensive individual on what I call a hunting or a fishing trip. "Go fish, go talk to people in your environment. Talk to a boss, talk to a trusted colleague, even talk to an executive or your personal

board of directors. Seek input, not on the content of the issue itself but on your process of managing it. Ask yourself: How do I interact? How do I interact when confronted? How do I interact when approached with a new idea? How do I interact when I am being challenged or I am under stress?

I like to help the individual self-discover by sending them on a fishing trip, by simply counting the number of instances that a certain thing occurs.

3. Finally, I ask the individual, "Wouldn't it be great if you could always start from the inside out, rather than the outside in?" The questions there look like, "Hey, what if those other people were partially to blame, but what if you had some part in it as well?" Therefore, helping people to understand not only the consequence of what they see in their environment, but what part they control—even if it's a small part—is a critical point of impact. This realization allows individuals to be able to challenge their externalizing and blaming behaviors.

Once we get here, you may sometimes find the individual is now self-correcting and self-coaching. This is what I mean by exercising your coaching superpower. Notice I don't start working on the issue or their individual development plan until I identify the defense mechanisms, counteract the externalizing, and allow the person to be self-critical in a safe and vulnerable way. Many times, the boss or the HR Business Partner may not have the ability to identify and erode the defense mechanisms. The external coach often has the opportunity to do that.

Ask: How often do you identify the specific defense mechanism and then develop a strategy to help the individual limit their own defenses? This will enhance your coaching superpower.

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