Recently, more public sector managers have incorporated techniques used by leadership and executive coaches into their management tool box. What’s the payoff for becoming a “manager-as-coach” in today’s busy workplace?

One perception of using coaching techniques is that they take excessive time—time away from performing real work. The book, Anytime Coaching: Unleashing Employee Performance, reveals how coaching conversations in the workplace actually take very little time to get real workplace gains. Indeed, exploring how to unleash the power of coaching conversations with employees creates stronger performance, accountability, and results.

The term “anytime coach” describes a successful manager who understands the value of having short, targeted coaching conversations when they are needed. The anytime coach views each employee-manager interaction as an opportunity for coaching in the moment for micro improvements that, when multiplied over many interactions and many employees, yield the desired organizational performance.

What does it take to be an anytime coach? It begins with a heavy dose of self-awareness, followed by skillful observing, inquiring, listening, and responding. With practical tools in each of these areas, any public manager
can become an anytime coach—and boost employees’ performance day by day.

**Four Key Practices**

The anytime coaching approach to managing people is practical. The model draws from a series of interviews with successful managers in the public sector, including such agencies as the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), the Central Intelligence Agency, NASA, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the U.S. Department of Education, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services University. The mid- to senior-level executives interviewed were identified because of their strong reputation for delivering outstanding results for their agencies and their successful use of coaching techniques. In other words, these leaders were already outstanding managers and coaches.

The model derived from these interviews has four key practices:

1. **observing (both yourself and your workers)**
2. **inquiring (asking incisive questions)**
3. **listening (becoming an “extreme” listener)**
4. **responding (being deliberate in how you respond to employees).**

**Look In and Out**

A manager committed to improving employee performance uses coaching strategies whenever possible. In doing so, the manager becomes an anytime coach—open and available to capture a “coachable moment.” Managers should begin by first looking inward and then looking outward—in other words, “to pay attention to what they are paying attention to.” What they discover may shed light on how their actions, voice, and general demeanor affect others in the workplace.

After becoming clear in how to view their own work, managers should practice observing others. Managers who refine their coaching skills will be more deliberate in noticing the nuances in how employees talk, work, move, and respond. They will observe all forms of communication—verbal, nonverbal, and emotional cues—given by employees, because all three provide critical information. Managers using anytime coaching techniques should pay close attention to incongruence in their employees’ words, tone of voice, and nonverbal communication.

Consider a case involving the director of a small agency’s federal data warehousing department, who relies heavily upon his talented deputy director: On Friday morning, before a long holiday weekend, he informed the deputy director that she would have to come into the office all weekend to ensure that an important data warehousing transaction would run smoothly. He explained that it was unexpected and that he was also going to have to give up his weekend.

As he spoke, the deputy director lowered her eyes, her posture slumped, and her voice grew quiet. “Sure, I’m happy to help you this weekend and come in on Saturday and Sunday,” she said. Usually, the deputy director maintained direct eye contact and spoke confidently. Being preoccupied with the data project, her manager did not observe the incongruence between her words and her body language and voice. She said she was happy to help, but her voice and posture conveyed the opposite.

A practiced manager-as-coach would notice the contradiction between his employee’s words and body language and would speak to the employee about his observations, exploring the underlying issues she had about working the weekend. A short, 10-minute coaching conversation would explore, and potentially address, her concerns. An experienced manager-as-coach would also recognize the importance of ensuring an employee has a chance to voice what her body language had already conveyed to ensure that open lines of communication and trust are preserved.

**Inquiring Minds Want to Know**

With observations of positive possibilities and expanded focus on all forms of communication, a manager will next want to learn as much about an employee or situation as possible. In the anytime coaching model, the second step—the practice of inquiring—involves asking incisive questions that engage employees.

Years ago, we worked with a popular supervisor of a team of procurement analysts who was promoted to take on a much larger team from across the division, including managing analysts with different technical specializations. The supervisor was effective managing a smaller scope—in which he could retain greater control as a subject matter expert—but struggled when his team size increased from 15 to 40 people. He also realized that managing outside of his technical area of expertise made him very uncomfortable.

Working with his own executive coach, the supervisor learned that he was not asking incisive questions, but rather simple factual, yes-no questions. Instead of becoming frustrated with the responses, he decided to change
his own practice of inquiry. When he began asking more open-ended questions to learn about how employees approached their procurement analysis, his new employees opened up and shared their ideas.

The benefit was an atmosphere of greater trust within the team of procurement analysts. The supervisor enjoyed learning and hearing more about the employees’ technical capabilities, without having to be the subject matter expert himself. More importantly, the information he gained enabled him to make smarter decisions on their behalf.

L Is for Listening

Many managers fall into the trap of overreacting when employees open up and share their views openly and honestly. Before reacting, managers need to acknowledge their own thoughts and focus solely on the person speaking.

One way to turn off the noise in our heads is to “step into a neutral zone.” Neutral zone listening is like tuning in clearly to a radio station—with no interference from other frequencies. To stay in this neutral zone

- set aside any judgments you have made about the person or situation
- commit to hearing all of what the other person says
- focus on getting more facts and asking clarification questions
- work to move the conversation forward
- be aware of your own and others’ emotions.

In a neutral zone, managers will be able to hear employees speak in a way that a cluttered mind cannot. Most people truly appreciate the opportunity to be fully heard, and what managers learn may be the critical facts needed to guide others or make important decisions.

Be Intentional in Responding

Managers who can both lead and coach have inspected their own viewpoints and preferences, and they have observed, inquired, and exercised extreme listening. So far, there has not been an opportunity to share wisdom, directions, or opinions. That is because managers-as-coaches make intentional choices when relating to employees—and “telling” is often the last choice. There are a number of other, specific choices managers can make when responding. Enter the “invitation.”

Managers who coach anytime the situation demands it will typically seek the involvement of others. The invitation makes this easy. Some sample invitations might include: “I am curious about how you see this situation, and I would like to hear your ideas,” or in a team setting, “There are still some team members who haven’t given us their input, and I am asking for your best thinking on how to solve the budget shortfall.”

By using the invitation, the manager transforms what could be a difficult battle of “my ideas” versus “your ideas” into a level playing field where employees get to contribute their best thinking and, as a result, feel valued and heard.

It is generally acknowledged that not being heard is one of the top reasons people to leave organizations. Making frequent use of the invitation helps create a work environment where employees know they are expected to share their thinking and managers are ready to listen.

Once an employee has shared a point of view or a proposed action, the coaching manager wisely uses a cluster of responses before presenting new ideas. A cluster of responses includes statements that acknowledge, affirm, and appreciate—the three As.
A dialogue might go like this:

**Employee:** I have found that having each department cut its budget by the same percentage is the fairest way to address the shortfall.

**Supervisor:** I hear what you are saying (acknowledgment). So, your thinking is that the same percentage cut from each department budget is the fairest method, right (affirmation)? I can understand that point of view, as I have worked that way in the past and it does look fair (appreciation).

Only after the three As should managers offer their perspective. Public managers who actually pause for a moment of extreme listening, look directly at their employee, and respond with the three As will be seen quite differently from one who barely looks in the employee’s direction and issues opinions and orders without acknowledging, affirming, and appreciating what has been said.

Obviously a manager’s role is complex, involving listening and appreciating as well as giving direction. Another important responding tool, for example, is the request. As with a directive, a request implies “do this” to the employee, but asking is very different from telling.

Employees need to be able to understand and differentiate when managers are directing and requesting. A clear request must be specific, and include a description of expected results and any deadlines. A well-phrased request opens up dialogue so both the requester and the person receiving the request understand what can and will be done—or not done. That said, when there is absolutely no room for dialogue or negotiation, give direction.

Giving directions is certainly a key part of being a manager, but many well-meaning managers are strong to a fault in this skill, and direction-giving crowds out more effective coaching behaviors. This is sometimes perceived as simply being a highly directive manager who tells employees what work to do, when to do it, and how to do it correctly and quickly.

You might be wondering, “What’s wrong with that?” Of course, part of a manager’s role is to ensure employees know their jobs and general methods for accomplishing tasks. But a manager who only directs and fails to observe, inquire, listen, and respond intentionally is likely to fall prey to the “fast results gene” (FRG).

### Taming the FRG

The FRG is that impulse to take shortcuts to get the fastest results possible. It supports the best of intentions—getting quick results. But unless it is tamed, employees working for a manager with a strong FRG learn to be passive and await the next cascade of orders. Employees gradually lose their interest in innovating and exploring new options, and they certainly do not feel heard.

For example, a manager in a federal agency highly valued for its accurate analysis said this: “My FRG is definitely dominant in my genetic makeup, and I have struggled in the past with slowing down my own internal thought process long enough to hear what my team members have to contribute. I spend a lot of time thinking about and putting into practice the techniques for slowing down my own thoughts and encouraging my staff to get very engaged.”

As a result, this manager-as-coach developed a process for particularly difficult team meetings that has worked wonders. He starts each meeting by outlining why the team is meeting and what, at a very high level, they are trying to accomplish. Then he opens the floor to discussion, sits back, and quietly performs breathing exercises while he listens to the team.

Sometimes it takes a painfully long time before anyone speaks, and it is interesting and instructive to watch how different team members deal with the silence. However, once the dam breaks, he almost always hears good ideas coming from team members. The manager can then focus his energy on asking open-ended questions that direct the team to anything they may not yet be dealing with but that are important to success.

### Coaching for Micro-Performance Improvements

What distinguishes the anytime coaching approach to managing people is the emphasis on micro-performance
improvements. It may be tempting to want to coach on larger performance and development issues and transformational change.

However, research behind the anytime coaching approach indicates that smaller achievements in employee performance are the building blocks that increase confidence, improve morale, and gain traction with employees. Building on micro improvements, the employee can take on more difficult challenges. With the emphasis on micro-performance improvements, anytime coaching conversations are highly focused and yield positive results for the employee and ultimately the organization.

Consider the case of a mid-level public manager in a state educational operations division who had recently transferred to a federal government job with comparable work: She inherited a small, four-person team. One team member seemed disengaged and unmotivated. Although her work quality was acceptable, it was almost always late, which affected the entire team. The manager, who had had training and experience in anytime coaching, decided that the micro improvement for this issue would be to complete weekly status reports on time and with greater accuracy.

Rather than coaching the employee on the larger themes of low energy and disengagement, the manager held two 10-minute coaching conversations on the topic of improving her performance on timely and accurate reports. She asked, “What would need to happen differently to get the report in on time?” She also asked how, as the manager, she could support her employee. The manager used straightforward conversational tools, such as requests and offers, and observed nonverbal cues while listening intently.

As it turned out, the coaching conversation revealed that the employee needed a critical piece of information from another department and was simply too timid to ask for the data. The employee was uncomfortable because she perceived that asking for the information might initiate conflict.

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The manager brainstormed with the employee about ways to get information from the other department. The manager-as-coach then helped the employee work on the difficult conversation that needed to take place with other members of the other team. The coaching conversations were brief, but they had a tremendous impact on the employee. The employee seemed more engaged and involved than in previous discussions. In the end, she was able to get the information she needed and submit the report on time.

Anytime Coaching at Your Agency

The anytime coaching approach is a simple, time-effective, and powerful management method that builds on what public managers already know how to do: observe, inquire, listen, and respond. Bringing out the best in people and helping them feel acknowledged and heard takes time, but the payoff in employee performance improvements is valuable time well spent. Anytime coaching is quick and focused, and the skills are ones any manager can learn.

Together, public managers and their employees will find anytime coaching an enjoyable way to interact, and more importantly, the catalyst for the day-to-day improvements that transform organizations. Public managers and the constituencies they serve will both benefit.

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