

Improving your coaching skills

By Rose O. Sherman, EdD, RN, NEA-BC, FAAN; and Tanya M. Cohn, PhD, MEd, RN

● Employees value managers who develop a coaching style of managing.

SUSAN is a seasoned nurse on a telemetry unit. One day, she arrives 20 minutes late, without explanation, to a mock code that the unit clinical educator is holding. The educator asks her to leave because she can't participate in the code in progress. Susan is offended. She sees herself as an experienced nurse and has complained in the past that mock codes are a waste of time.

The clinical educator reports the incident to Nancy, the unit manager. Nancy schedules an appointment with Susan and the clinical educator to discuss the incident.

Coaching is a critical part of the nurse leader's role. But a busy leader like Nancy may have difficulty finding time in her schedule to work through performance issues such as Susan's. Nancy's initial reaction of exasperation could stem from her frustration with Susan and her belief that she shouldn't be cavalier about participating in mock codes.

Michael Simpson, a coaching expert and author, recommends leaders adopt a viewpoint that coaching is about understanding that everyone can grow and become better despite the situation that's driving the coaching. Coaching unleashes a person's potential.

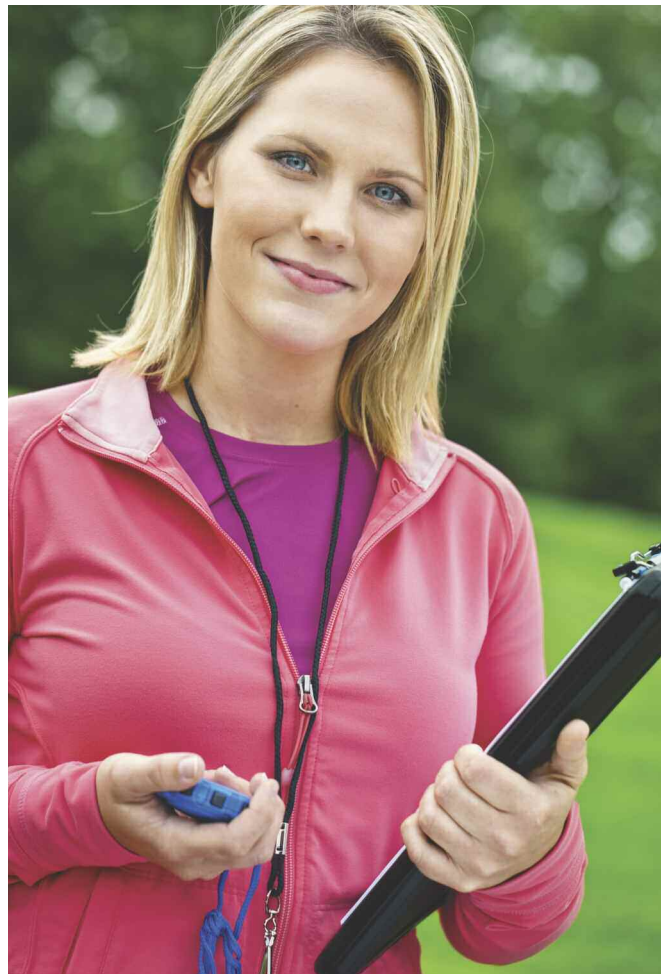
Good coaching is an art. A good coach is an active listener and adept at asking open-ended, reflective questions. The investment a nurse leader makes in becoming a skilled coach can have a profound influence on staff engagement. Mary Koloroutis, an author and healthcare consultant, suggests that when coaching, leaders should emphasize the present moment with a willingness to help staff members let go of their past mistakes, make new choices, and forge a different future.

Six stages of coaching

To coach staff members to a higher performance level, work in stages, as described below.

Stage 1: Build an atmosphere of trust

Trust is an essential component of a healthy coaching



relationship. You can't be an effective coach if you don't have genuine concern for the welfare of the person you're coaching. The coachee deserves and expects honesty, integrity, sincerity, and confidentiality. Whatever takes place within the context of the coaching environment must remain confidential.

Stage 2: Clarify the purpose of coaching

As a leader, you need to be specific about the coachee's unacceptable behavior in an objective, nonjudgmental way. For instance, Nancy needs to ask Susan reflective questions to gain insight into her behavior and find out what she found challenging in the mock code situation. She also needs to ask why she chose to come 20 minutes late to the mock code without offering an explanation.

Stage 3: Ensure a commitment to improve

Coaching for the purpose of improving staff performance can be challenging unless both parties agree on the need for change. Nancy needs to be clear that Susan didn't meet performance expectations in the mock code situation and should explain why even experienced staff must participate in mock codes.

Stage 4: Explore alternative behaviors

In this stage of coaching, Nancy could help identify solution-oriented strategies by asking Susan such questions as, "What would you do differently if this happened again?" The best strategies come from the coachee. In our scenario, these would be strategies Susan believes are feasible and achievable. Performance expectations for alternative behaviors need to be made clear, and strategies should be specific and action-oriented.

Stage 5: Get a commitment to act

Once the two parties choose a corrective strategy, the coachee needs to commit to working on changing her behavior. The coach should ask her if she can do anything else to help her achieve the desired behavior change. If this desired change is critical, the coaching plan should be written down and both the coach and coachee should sign it.

Stage 6: Provide feedback

Effective coaching involves giving timely and specific performance feedback. During the next mock code, Nancy will want to give Susan feedback about her performance in a positive, encouraging way.

Dos and don'ts of coaching

In your role as a coach, follow these guidelines:

Do use a person-centered, solution-focused approach

To make coaching both person- and solution-focused, be mindfully present during the coaching session. Although tuning out the demands of running a unit can pose a challenge, you should silence your phone and ignore emails or texts during this time. Instead, focus your full attention on the coachee. Maintain eye contact and listen actively to fully understand her perspective.

Do ask reflective questions

Ask the coachee questions that elicit her reflections on the situation in question. For instance, Nancy should ask Susan questions that elicit her perception of the value of mock codes, the need for nurses to always conduct themselves professionally, and the essentials of being part of a team in a unit.

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Assessing your coaching effectiveness

To improve as a coach, practice self-reflection after each coaching session. Replay the session in your mind, assessing your vocal tone, energy pattern, and awareness of your reactions. Consider this a chance to critique yourself and think about what you might have done differently.

During self-reflection, ask yourself the following questions:

- Could I have used a different approach that might have been more successful?
- Did I talk too much and listen too little?
- Did I ask questions the right way?
- Did I end up with the coachee's commitment to act?
- Did we develop a follow-up plan together?

Self-reflection nurtures open-mindedness

For many coaches, their deeply held views frame their thinking, which can lead to narrow-mindedness. Self-reflection can open their minds. As natural problem solvers, nurse leaders may want to jump into a discussion of the incident in question as an example of inappropriate behavior, and they may try to devise an instant solution. For instance, Nancy could simply have pulled Susan aside and told her she needs to be on time and play an active role in mock codes. But if instead she coaches her in a focused, nondistracted way, the outcome can be much more powerful.

other team members view unacceptable behavior as appropriate.

Do use silence strategically

Although silence can be uncomfortable, you can use it during a coaching session as a way to avoid the urge to jump in and fill the vacuum with words.

Do develop a clear, specific plan

End the coaching session on a positive note by formulating a clear, specific plan. In our case scenario, the plan should include Susan's commitment to arrive at mock codes on time and curb her negative attitude toward taking part in them. Nancy needs to make sure Susan understands that her commitment to being an active team member reflects her commitment to the

Do draw a line between acceptable and unacceptable behaviors

Be clear with the coachee about what behavior is and isn't acceptable, so that neither the coachee nor

unit. She should emphasize that as a seasoned nurse, Susan must keep in mind that she's a role model for less experienced nurses and her behavior could influence their thinking and behavior.



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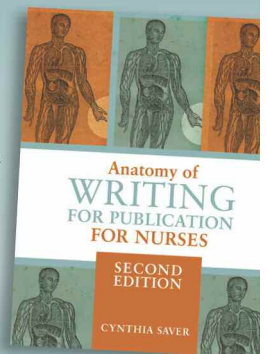
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An authoritarian approach can build resentment and reduce approachability.

Don't be authoritarian

When dealing with seasoned nurses like Susan, leaders might be inclined to take a more authoritarian approach by maintaining a strong presence and keeping the power dynamic in their favor. However, unless the situation is critical (such as an actual code instead of a mock code), an authoritarian approach can build resentment and reduce approachability. So reserve that approach for situations with little margin for error.

Instead, your coaching style should mirror your leadership style. It should be built on motivating through crucial conversations. These conversations need to be timely (occurring shortly after the incident) and conducted in a respectful, peer-to-peer manner. Both parties should regard the conversation as a partnership without minimizing the issue in question.

Don't play the blame game

During coaching sessions and crucial conversations, avoid the blame game. Focusing on who's at fault is unproductive and hinders development of behaviors that enhance performance and effectiveness.

Be a manager who's also a coach

Coaching for performance is an ongoing process. If

you commit to it, it gets easier over time. (See *Assessing your coaching effectiveness*.)

Remember—true change in staff behavior comes from increased self-esteem, professional empowerment, and the support of a great coach who has staff members' best interests at heart. Research shows that staff highly value managers who develop a coaching style of managing. With this approach, you can become the leader no one wants to leave. ★

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