A “Coach Approach” to Staff Engagement

Margaret Macmillan
Branch Manager
Markham Public Library
mmacmill@markham.library.on.ca

Abstract

The speed of change is challenging libraries to redevelop themselves in ways we have never seen before. Rising costs and changing customer expectations are forcing staff to continuously learn new skills, adapt to new technologies and work more closely in collaboration with others in response to this unpredictable environment. At the same time, library leaders need to communicate regularly with staff and to motivate them to dialogue with each other about the value of the library service they provide to the community. A creative approach to building flexibility, resilience and staff engagement has become essential for survival.

Coaching is a creative, innovative and effective communications tool that is now considered to be one of the most important ways to encourage employees to continue to learn and develop. Its greatest impact is in building leadership and staff engagement. Communicating with “a coach approach” or coaching mindset is a powerful way for library leaders to connect with others where the flow and exchange is positive and there is a mutual benefit of contribution and collaboration, expanded knowledge and innovation. The basics of fostering “a coach approach” with library staff requires an understanding of the importance of “reframing” one’s personal attitudes and perspectives, appreciating the art of focused listening and the impact of positive acknowledgement, learning to ask the right questions and formulating action plans for continued success. It is a learned skill that requires a commitment to practice but is one that will ultimately demonstrate positive results.

Keywords

coaching; communication; staff engagement; leadership; management

The speed of change is challenging libraries to redevelop themselves in ways we have never seen before. Rising costs and changing customer expectations are forcing staff to learn new skills, upgrade existing skills, adapt to new technologies and work more closely with each other in response to an unpredictable environment. A creative approach to building flexibility, resilience and staff engagement has become essential for survival. Author and economist Richard Florida, who was the keynote speaker at the 2009 Ontario Library Association Super Conference, affirms this further in his report “Ontario in the Creative Age” by saying that there “is no greater resource than the creativity, innovativeness and productive talents of our people” (Martin and Florida 1).
At the same time, library employees at all levels need to continue to interact with each other and to have ongoing dialogue about the value of library services that they are providing to the community on a daily basis. In her book *Coaching in the Library: A Management Strategy for Achieving Excellence (2nd edition)* library management coach Ruth Metz stresses that, through continuous dialogue and feedback, library staff can recognize how important their work is and how it connects to the larger vision of the library (57-58).

Enter the concept of coaching, which is a creative and innovative approach that is proving to have a real impact on building leadership and staff engagement in today’s business world. The positive and supportive dialogue that coaching provides can maximize the strengths and skills of staff in the library environment and provide the necessary motivation for each one to pursue continuous learning.

**What is Coaching?**

Coaching is an interactive process and partnership that builds positive connections between managers and staff. It is an approach and a way of thinking that engages all staff in an organization, helping them work towards their highest levels of excellence both individually, and as part of a peak-performance team. Coaching is not a solution to every situation; however, it is an important tool for improving the effectiveness of the organization as a whole.

Ask a group of people about their experiences with coaching and a wide variety of responses and interpretations will result, ranging from stories about sports coaching, therapy, mentoring, consulting, counselling and performance discipline to simple praise, recognition and encouragement. A coach may very well include aspects of tutoring, mentoring and counselling when working with individuals to help them achieve their performance goals; however, the emphasis is on actively helping the employee take his or her own steps towards learning and development.

**Why Coaching?**

Coaching first gained widespread acceptance in organizations in the 1990s and has flourished in recent years. Today the coaching industry is one of the fastest growing industries in the world, and coaching is considered to be one of the most important ways to encourage employees to continue to learn and develop.

True coaching cultures are being implemented in innovative and high-performing businesses, such as Ernst & Young LLP, which this year was named on Fortune’s 100 Best Companies to Work For list for the 12th year in a row. In their learning and development program EYU – “Ernst & Young and You” - every employee receives coaching and is expected to coach others in a variety of ways. Through meaningful conversations, structured feedback and mentoring from peers and senior colleagues, employees work through challenging client issues and develop leadership and relationship skills. Employees ultimately enjoy the rewards and satisfaction of helping
colleagues improve their confidence and skills while simultaneously developing their own ("Experiences, Learning and Coaching". Ernst & Young Web). “Helping others succeed is at the heart of how we work" (Ernst & Young LLP).

Coaching and Libraries

What can this mean for libraries? Today’s library managers and leaders are being challenged to maximize not only their own performance, but that of their staff. Leaders must help staff through succession and change transition, including personal career and work-life balance issues which can greatly impact performance. Library managers must also be able to engage staff to think and work creatively as individuals and in teams and to continually challenge them to seek excellence. To do this leaders need to move away from the traditional “command and control” style of leadership – monitoring, supervision and being the expert – to one that empowers and facilitates.

“Excellence is about a transformation of thinking. It requires collaboration and teamwork… Excellence is therefore about heart, relationships and how people customers/employees/suppliers) treat and communicate with each other.”

Adam Stoehr, VP Education, National Quality Institute (n. pag.)

A number of library systems have begun to incorporate more supportive approaches to professional growth development. “Peer coaching”, "peer-to-peer training" or “peer mentoring” are processes used with staff to improve reader’s advisory, reference, technology and other specialized skills in the library environment. This peer-to-peer relationship can also allow staff to maximize what they learn from the outcome of training initiatives, such as storytelling and other programming techniques.

- The University of Massachusetts, Amherst, uses peer coaching and mentoring to help “support colleagues in their professional development and growth, facilitate mutual learning, and build a sense of community” (Stoltz and Czarnecki).

- The Library Associate Training Institute (LATI) in Maryland is a comprehensive, 12-week program designed to meet the training needs of new library associates (LAs) from 24 public library systems and 3 regional libraries. As well as providing tools, techniques and practical opportunities for LAs to enhance and develop their professional competencies, LATI focuses on teaching staff how to use coaching as a learning tool, practice and coach Model Communication Behaviors and initiate coaching conversations with their colleagues (Stoltz and Czarnecki).

- The Emergent Literacy Peer Coaching Project team at Carroll County (Md.) Public Library developed a training program for staff “coaches” who use the Peer Coaching Toolkit with story time presenters to encourage the continued use of best practices during story time. Staff members reflect upon and assess their own presentations with the support and feedback of a peer. Comments from the survey tool used to evaluate the pilot program reveal that one hundred percent of the lead coaches felt their staff had “grown in their knowledge base and/or
emergent literacy story time delivery as a result of this initiative” (Stoltz and Czarnecki).

- Brampton Public Library (Ontario) initiated an internal mentoring program whereby library mentors provide their “mentees” – new hires, newly-promoted staff – with personal, individualized guidance while at the same time enhancing their own leadership skills. Results reported include easier transitions, increased self-confidence, positive morale and a feeling of staff inclusion within the organization (Kostiak and Taylor).

- Markham Public Library (Ontario) has developed a peer-training program for new Library Service Associates who are paired with experienced colleagues to review current library practices, build new skills, share ideas, teach one another and solve problems in the workplace. This on-going dialogue is supported by formal training in basic library service, library collections and policies, and customer service excellence.

Although terms such as peer-to-peer “mentoring” or “training” can be used interchangeably with “coaching”, it is important to understand that the concept of true coaching is not based on advice-giving, problem-solving, imparting knowledge and experience, evaluating or judging. The emphasis of coaching is on positive, supportive dialogue which moves away from advice-giving and problem-solving and focuses instead on bringing out the best in another person.

**Using “A Coach Approach”**

Coaching is now moving away from a focus on the “business elite” – the world of executive coaching – and is penetrating into all levels of the workplace, including libraries. It is not necessary for library leaders to go to the full extent of developing coaching cultures in their organizations, to hire professional coaches or receive certification in executive coaching courses in order to foster “a coach approach” to management.

Every situation in the library environment presents opportunities for coaching:

- A problem employee is chronically late for her shifts
- A new hire requires support and direction
- A newly-promoted supervisor is experiencing time management problems because she is micromanaging her staff
- A timid manager is reluctant to confront difficult people and needs guidance
- A negative employee is affecting staff morale in a branch

Most of the time, coaching takes place during the course of everyday business, whenever a perceptive manager sees a way to help employees do things better (Luecke and Ibarra Introduction). “A coach approach” style does not only have to be used in a formal pre-arranged meeting. It may be a chance meeting in the hallway, a telephone
session or a coaching interaction that comes about unexpectedly during a casual lunch. Whatever the situation, the basic structure and outcome of coaching are essentially the same.

**Coaching is a process** that will result in a change for the better. Not only is coaching an overall process, but each individual coaching interaction is a process within itself, involving **listening beneath the words, acknowledging**, getting to the substance by **asking good questions** and bringing closure with **action planning** and follow-up support. Even in the simplest of coaching conversations, library managers as coaches can help individuals or teams move from where they are to where they want to go.

**Connecting Through Communication**

To make good connections a library manager needs to identify with others by being willing to take an interest in the other person, finding common ground, recognizing the value the other has to offer and relating to him or her in a way that builds trust and rapport. A coaching conversation is the best way to achieve this when connecting and communicating with other people, as the flow and exchange are positive and there is a mutual benefit of contribution and collaboration, expanded knowledge and innovation.

Communication, however, is not all about words. More than 90 percent of the impressions we convey have nothing to do with what we actually say. In 1967, UCLA professor Albert Mehrabian published the results of his series of experiments with college students in two journals: the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology and the Journal of Consulting Psychology. These findings went on to become known as the popular “55/38/7” rule, which states:

- What we say accounts for only 7% of what is believed
- The way we say it accounts for 38% (tone of voice)
- What others see accounts for 55% (body language)


The way we choose to convey our messages and the attitudes we have already formed can greatly impact the outcome and success or failure of the coaching conversation.

**Reframing Our Thinking**

Coaching must begin with an awareness of our ability to reframe our communication. Reframing communication is about shifting our thinking, our perspective, and moving beyond our assumptions, opinions and beliefs to see what is possible in others, so that we can help others see for themselves what is possible. For some, this may come more easily than others. It is a learned approach, requiring practice and repetition. It also requires awareness of our attitudes, our responses and of what is needed to change.
Research shows that we spend far more time thinking about how we can correct something that has gone wrong, or is about to go wrong, rather than celebrating what has gone right.

Coaching uses a positive communication approach which seeks to discover the best in others, opening a person to expand and to learn what is possible. It involves creative brainstorming and moving from focusing on what is wrong to what is right.

**Mindfulness**

Managers easily become absorbed in tasks and distracted for various reasons. They can miss subtle clues and signals that are right around them pertaining to potential staff issues. Mindfulness is one of the distinguishing characteristics of “a coach approach” – being constantly observant and aware of what is happening in the workplace.

When communicating with others most of us are familiar with the importance of changing our tone of voice, wording, inflection, pacing and accompanying body language. All too often, however, we ignore the subtleties of the responses we get from others or confuse them with our own internal “interpretations” of what is happening and what it means. What we really need to master is the art of watching the reactions of others, sensing and understanding their responses to what we say so that we can adjust our responses and come closer to delivering the real message that is intended.

**Listening Beneath the Words**

“Listening requires giving up our favorite human pastime – involvement in ourselves and our own self-interest” Sonya Hamlin (47).

Many people treat communication as a “push to talk” activity. They go into broadcast mode and when they have said their piece they believe their message has been delivered. If the other person does not seem to “get” the message they simply repeat it – in the same way, over and over – or with minor variations.

Taking the time, through focused listening and silence, to hear the employee’s side of the story and to have him help develop the solution, creates buy-in and shares the responsibility for improving the overall work environment for your staff. It is an often-overlooked activity in a manager’s busy schedule. Instead of trying to get ahead by correcting, it is important instead to try connecting. Avoid saying: “Hurry up and finish telling me your problem so I can give you my solution.” Suspend all judgement and instead become curious, neutral and agenda-free. What is not being said?
Acknowledgement

Coaching is often mistaken for the thanks we give employees when they do a good job or go the extra mile for a customer. This type of recognition is important feedback that should be provided but is not actually coaching.

The most important form of acknowledgement is listening. When leaders take the time to listen and acknowledge other points of view, employees feel enabled, valued and appreciated. The organization benefits in the long run. Employees are empowered to speak freely knowing that what they have to say is of value. Specific acknowledgement empowers a person to stretch further and to feel confident that he is trusted to handle a situation. When given sincerely, positive reinforcing feedback can have a huge impact on the employee, both personally and professionally.

Asking the Right Questions

An emerging body of research indicates that a specific type of dialogue – coaching – can lead to a hard-wired change in the way our brain thinks. David Rock, author of Coaching With the Brain in Mind, presents the claim of UCLA psychiatrist Leslie Brothers in her publication Friday’s Footprint (1997) that “the human brain is built for social interaction” (qtd. in Rock 426). Seeking answers to questions we have never asked before actually changes and develops our mental “muscles” and “having social brains enables us to draw on the experiences of others” (Rock and Page 429).

Asking the right questions to look into the situation and uncover the details is core to the conversation. Reframe it! Before you open your mouth to speak, you need to take a moment to frame the question you are about to ask. Phrase the question in such a way as to genuinely invite the other person to offer his or her personal response. Open questions bring out more information and allow the employee to unlock his/her thinking. Think also about how the question is landing with the other person. Be succinct and clear.

Checking for Understanding

Both the manager and the employee should use questions to clarify their positions throughout the conversation. Asking “This is what I heard you say. Is that what you meant?” is an easy and effective way to check for understanding.

It is an illusion that we all understand each other when we use the same words. There is always going to be a difference in meaning:

- “I can’t finish the assignment this month,” – may be saying “I need help with a time-management problem.”
• “Perhaps Peter should do this. He’s better at it than I am.” – may be a signal that the person lacks confidence in a skill.
• “Thanks for letting me know about the job posting, but I’m not interested.” – may be indicating that the person is not confident or feels ill-prepared.

Be mindful of accepting statements at face value. People don’t always know what kind of help they need or how to ask for it. Take the initiative by asking open questions. When you are doing the talking you are not learning anything.

**Action Planning**

Coaching is simply a conversation unless action is taken and someone is accountable. Who owns the problem/solution? Have the employee articulate back to you to eliminate misunderstandings by asking “What are you taking away from this conversation?” “What are you committing to do and by when?”

**Support and Follow Up**

Once you and the employee are in agreement about the solution or action to be taken, it is important to follow through with additional support and training. In 1998, Debbie Schachter, then Area Manager-East for the Vancouver, British Columbia Public Library, emphasized in her article *Look for the Coachable Moment to Improve Staff Performance*: “This helps the employee to make the improvement, and it shows that you are interested in supporting their progress. This also makes it clear that you are available for follow-up coaching as required” (3).

**Outcomes**

Most managers have little time. Why coach, given the time and effort involved? Effective coaching in the library environment makes the job easier by increasing learning, developing staff skills, overcoming employee problems and preparing people for promotion, which in turn cascades through to improved customer service excellence, increased staff morale and productivity, reduced staff turnover and improved staff engagement (Luecke and Ibarra 3).

Whether a “coach approach" between a library leader and an employee takes place as a “coaching moment” or involves a longer-term process of communication, coaching is focused on facilitating change for the better. Coaching builds trust between managers and employees, and trust translates into greater engagement. The introduction of “a coach approach" to staff learning and growth in the library environment can add increased value to library strategic planning for organizational excellence and continue to support leaders through future change.
Margaret Macmillan is a Certified Executive Coach and a Library Manager with the Markham Public Library system in Ontario who uses “a coach approach” on a daily basis with her staff. She has led workshops on coaching techniques at the 2011 OLA Super Conference, at the SOLS Leadership Summit in March, 2011 and presented an Education Institute seminar entitled “Connect with Coaching” in April, 2011. Margaret will be co-leading a Pre-Conference workshop on “Powerful Conversations” with fellow coach and librarian Julie Mandal at the 2012 OLA Super Conference.

Works Cited


