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How to Be a Great Coach in a Chaotic Environment



How to Be a Great Coach in a Chaotic Environment

by Edward G. Brown

Do you work in a disruptive setting? Today, many do. The growing popularity of wide-open office designs can have a downside. They can make it difficult to hold private conversations. And of all the conversations that want privacy, coaching is certainly one of them!

As a coach, you want to focus closely on the person you're coaching, listen attentively to their issues, and detect teaching opportunities. And you certainly don't want to expose those whom you're coaching to any embarrassment or censure when you have to speak frankly on sensitive matters, as we discovered at a client site.

We were working in one of the most chaotic contact center environments we had ever encountered. It was so noisy and harried (even for a contact center) that my colleague on visiting it for the first time couldn't help whispering, "Are we in Grand Central Station?"

She wasn't far off. The whole place was in constant motion; monitors flashing information and entertainment, bells ringing and everybody talking, even shouting. Nothing was missing but the trains.

We were there to help the center's team leaders lift the performance of their teams – increase sales, improve call quality and reduce employee turnover. We had queried them about their greatest needs, and one team leader's answer pretty much captured it for all of them. She said:

Coaching is so hard here! I lose employees with good potential simply because I cannot get in good coaching sessions with them. When I get interrupted two or three times in half an hour — and that's conservative — that rep leaves not having learned much. Her performance doesn't improve, so

my numbers don't, and the next thing you know, she's gone, and I'm training a new one. Such a waste, when I know exactly what could have kept her!

Obviously, this job was going to take more than our traditional coaching training. No matter how good they are at coaching, people can't deliver their best when they are constantly distracted from their work. Equally obvious, we couldn't do much about the physical environment — it was an open floor plan in a fancy new building that the company was very proud of.

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No, these team leaders needed to learn special skills for protecting their time during coaching sessions and staying focused no matter what was going on around them.

Here's how they did that:

They Learned to Protect their Concentration from Time Bandits.

Besides all the ambient noise that surrounded our coaches, they were further interrupted by people who would walk up to their desks and engage them no matter what they were involved in. It was such a common occurrence that nobody noticed all the damage it did — the time wasted, the intrusion on private sessions, the difficulty of getting back on track, etc. People were surprised when we told them it didn't have to be that way! But they were glad to learn negotiating techniques for persuading "Time Bandits" not to interrupt them during specified periods. And they were absolutely thrilled to see how much

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work they got done, and how well they did it, when they went uninterrupted.

Incorporating Time Locking into their Culture

If one team leader wanted to take two hours to focus on coaching without being interrupted, she would negotiate that time slot in advance with the other team leaders. Having learned the value of “time locking,” the other team leaders were happy to cover for one another so they could get their precious two hours when their turns came.

They were scrupulous, too, about respecting the time locks. They created three-dimensional Time Locking signs to place atop their cubicles, so that it was obvious when they could be approached and when they could not. They quickly learned that most of the reasons people had for interrupting could easily wait.

Said one happy team leader, *“I couldn’t believe how much difference the signs made. Before, no matter how engrossed I was in a coaching session, I couldn’t help being aware of the likelihood of an interruption — and that awareness itself is its own kind of distraction. But when I put up the sign, I knew I would be in the clear until I took it down. It was like being in a cocoon of concentration.”*

Endless Ambient Noise and Motion

Even when they weren’t experiencing direct interruptions, the entire environment still conspired to draw their attention from whatever they wanted to focus on.

The first thing they needed to do was believe that they could exercise control over their minds. Their environment made them particularly prone to what I call “mental leakage.” We would see them hunching over their desks, shielding their eyes with one hand and wearing noise-cancelling headphones — but that didn’t solve the problem; it just displayed their discomfort. Clearly, they were prime candidates for techniques that build the mental strength to close off distractions.

There are many such proven techniques. Here are a few they learned that made the most difference:

- **Transcending the environment means rising above physical issues that you can’t change.** They might tell themselves, for example: “Instead of letting the constant ringing of other phones annoy me while I’m coaching, I’ll train myself to think of it as a joyful sound, because it means we have a lot of customers who need us — it means our jobs are secure!”
- **Constructive acceptance means accepting gracefully the things that can’t be changed.** “When I know my coaching session is going to be a tough one, it would be so nice to have a private room available. But that’s out of the question, so I will just work on my manner and delivery so that I don’t embarrass or offend my rep.”

- **Visualizing the ideal means picturing the positive outcomes of staying focused on your work.** “The three people I will coach during my two-hour time lock have the potential to be my top performers. I can just picture them claiming their sales awards.” The mind follows the imagination, and the physical follows the mental.
- **Positive affirmation involves using a positive phrase to enable whatever outcome you desire.** Repeating your chosen phrase programs your subconscious mind to think favorably about the work in front of you, and gives you a rush of energy to stick to it. Any phrase will do if it strikes a positive chord for you such as, “My coaching pays off!” or “Stick with it!”
- **Psychological counterpunching battles back at distractions.** Say a team leader is tempted to take a break in a coaching session to watch a new video on a nearby monitor. Mentally she throws a counterpunch, “That wouldn’t be fair to the person I’m coaching.” And then she follows it with her best punch: “We will both get more satisfaction out of a completed job than out of some video!”
- **Changing your internal computer chip means replacing a bad habit with a useful one.** Some team leaders had a habit of putting off scheduled coaching sessions if the atmosphere became especially noisy, so the coaching sessions became erratic. To change that, the team leaders would remind themselves, “If I don’t treat these sessions as important, my reps won’t either. I will stick to the schedule unless there’s an emergency.”

Follow these tips and you may agree with this team leader in our “Grand Central Station”: “I found it extremely beneficial. By locking dedicated time, I found my coaching sessions improved with no interruptions as did my results. I was also able to listen to more calls and get a better insight into what my reps are actually doing. One of the key indicators which can’t be measured was a decrease in personal stress and an increase in my personal productivity.” ■

about the author

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