Creating a Supportive Coaching Culture with Self-Referenced Feedback

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The most difficult aspect of coaching, or any behavior change effort, is not initiating changes in behavior - it's getting those changes implemented and maintained in the workplace. The use of self-referenced feedback (often referred to as ipsative feedback) during the coaching process can facilitate both planning for implementation of change and creating a supportive work culture that will maintain and build on the change.

OVERVIEW OF THE COACHING PROCESS

Those of us who take a performance-based view of coaching usually follow a set of steps not unlike those used in any other coaching process. The primary difference lies in the way those steps are performed, and the use of self-referenced (ipsative) feedback can be a key factor. In addition, there is a strong emphasis on creating a culture that supports the desired performance.

The basic performance coaching steps are described below. This paper focuses on the use of self-referenced or ipsative feedback during steps 5 and 6. The intention of such feedback is to both facilitate acceptance of feedback during coaching and development efforts, and increase the likelihood of producing effective change in the workplace. This kind of feedback also can be of significant value in fostering a culture that supports and maintains that change.

1. **Define desired outcomes.** The purpose of most coaching in organizational settings is to help individuals either to become more effective at leading/managing their teams or to become more effective as individual contributors. Other purposes might include improving the productivity of a team or increasing its ability to adapt or innovate.

2. **Identify practices that influence the desired outcomes.** Typically, the emphasis is on critical behavioral practices that contribute to accomplishing the outcomes, but it is also useful to identify existing practices that are inhibiting their accomplishment.

3. **Determine how to address the issue.** An alternative might be instruction (e.g., a leadership development course for new/inexperienced employees). This step should also include a review of workplace
performance influences to check for factors that may inhibit people from using the desired practices. Depending on what such a review indicates, a hybrid approach to performance improvement may be used.

4. **Determine the current level of performance of critical practices.** There are three common methodologies for this assessment: observations, interviews, and surveys. Observations can be conducted in the workplace (e.g., by sitting in on team meetings) or by observing clients in simulation exercises. Interviews and surveys can be conducted directly with a client or with others who interact with the client in the workplace. Each of these approaches has strengths and limitations in cost-effectiveness, practicality, and the nature and quality of data obtained. A good rule of thumb is to avoid relying exclusively on a single method or source of data.

5. **Provide feedback on practices and develop implementation plans.** Once information has been collected and analyzed, it must be provided to people in a manner that is useful as a base for improvement. A key role of coaches is to help clients focus on the best targets of opportunity for improving. Suggestions and plans for improvement may be made by either coach or client, or developed jointly. Suggestions from clients should be strongly encouraged, as people are often more likely to effectively execute plans that they have devised themselves. The feedback and planning experience should act to increase the likelihood that people will action and avoid anything that would demotivate them.

6. **Provide for follow-up support.** Coach and client should look for ways to build support for change beyond the coaching event. This may include forming support groups or encouraging clients to share their data with workplace colleagues, work teams, or others as appropriate (Goldsmith, 2007; Steinbrenner, Kumata, & Schlosser, 2007). Coaching usually involves more than determining where a person needs help and suggesting what they can do to improve. It's equally important to provide motivation and support for change, and look for ways to eliminate factors that may inhibit change. Creating a supportive culture is an important factor here.

**APPROACHES TO PROVIDING FEEDBACK**

Almost everyone who has been involved in coaching – or instruction that incorporates feedback – has seen negative reactions to feedback. When feedback is less positive than participants expect, or would like, they are sometimes disbelieving, sometimes discouraged,
sometimes angry. When people get extremely positive feedback, they sometimes decide they have no need for coaching or development. None of those reactions facilitates planning for change or improved performance in the workplace. Our experience has shown that the manner in which feedback is provided is a key factor in people's willingness and ability to use it effectively (Tosti & Jackson, 1999).

**Methods of presenting feedback data**

Our focus here is on the presentation of feedback data compiled from ratings of clients' or participants' behavior in the workplace, by people who are in a position to observe them. Depending on the type of behavior, these may be peers/colleagues or subordinates, and sometimes superiors.

There are a variety of ways to present data. The three most common approaches are these:

1. **Average ratings**: simply the mean of all rater's scores on each behavior rated.
2. **Percentile scores**: a comparison of an individual's scores to the mean scores of a group of "similar" people.
3. **Ipsative scores**: self-referenced feedback, showing scores on each behavior as deviations from the individual's average across all behaviors.

Feedback is typically provided in graphic form on a number of behaviors that have been rated on a numeric scale (7-point rating scales are common). Both averages and percentiles have properties that can limit their effectiveness as stimuli for improvement.

First, they often cause recipients of the feedback to focus, at least initially, on how 'good' or 'bad' their performance looks to others. This is particularly the case with percentile feedback, which directly compares the individual with others. It can be hard to get people past this initial reaction to focus on where and how they can improve their performance.

Second, people are often given average and percentile feedback in private, and are reluctant to share their feedback with others. The result can be a tendency to isolate people from their colleagues and lose the benefits to be gained from working together on plans for improvement (Goldsmith, 2008).

Ipsative feedback minimizes the difficulties inherent in average and percentile feedback by presenting data as deviations from an individual's own overall average.

**USING IPSATIVE (SELF-REFERENCED) FEEDBACK**

**Presenting the data**

The first step in creating reports for the presentation of ipsative feedback is the same as that for average or percentile feedback.
reports: compute the average ratings for each behavioral practice for each individual, as well as the overall average for all behaviors combined. A graph prepared at this point would look something like this:

Figure 1. Ratings of the recipient by items and their mean

The next step is to calculate deviations from the individual's overall mean: eliminate the actual average ratings. This would create a graph something like the figure below:

Figure 2. Deviations from the recipient's means

When the behavioral practices are first determined, they are clustered into related sets of practices both to facilitate comprehension and
planning, and to allow the feedback to be given to people in relatively small, coherent "chunks" of five to six practices at a time, as illustrated below.

Figure 3. Practices clustered by group relationships

![Figure 3](image1)

As a result, someone would get several one-page feedback reports over a period of time, something like the one below, with relevant behavioral practices listed below the graph. This provides a manageable chunk of data for people to work with.

Figure 4. Report to recipient

![Figure 4](image2)
Working with the data
This method of providing feedback greatly facilitates sharing feedback with others and working in teams to improve performance, since people are not compared with one another and actual average scores do not appear. No one’s feedback looks significantly ‘better’ or ‘worse’ than anyone else’s, since everyone in a group will have an equal number of bars above and below their mean.

Ipsative feedback helps take the focus off how ‘well’ people are doing in the performance area and put it on where people have the best opportunities to improve performance. This approximates the way athletic coaches work. Effective athletic coaches don’t invest their time in rating or comparing players while working with them; they focus on giving advice for improvement. For example, a tennis coach working with the best player on the team might give advice about how to strengthen his or her backhand as the best way to improve the player’s game — and might well give the same advice to the weakest player on the team.

We often give ipsative feedback data in a group setting. This allows members of the group to exchange ideas on what they can do to improve; often even the least skilled members of the group can provide useful ideas, since they are familiar with the workplace environment. It also contributes to strengthening working relationships that will help build and maintain a supportive culture.

Since everyone will have some low items to look at as well as some highs, the fear of sharing data and ‘exposure’ of weaknesses is greatly diminished. As a result, the majority of people are also willing to share the data with their work groups and peers once they return to the work environment. It is not unusual to find that they have posted their data on the walls of their office for everyone to see.

Impact on organizational change and culture
Working with feedback in a group setting not only helps people focus effectively on ways to improve, it helps initiate working relationships that provide an opportunity to create an ongoing support group. We encourage teams to continue to meet after the session to discuss their progress and look for ways to continue to improve. This often creates very strong support teams; groups have been known to meet for years to support each other in improving their management practices.

In addition, the openness and supportive working relationships initiated in the feedback sessions can begin to spread throughout the organization's culture. In one instance (Tosti, 1992), a climate survey that included a measure of the degree of openness in organizations was administered before and after ipsative coaching. The organization showed a significant increase in overall openness, posting one of the highest ratings ever reported on the survey.
Development and implementation of plans to improve is greatly facilitated by providing feedback in manageable quantities, as well as by using ipsative data. Experienced coaches know that people can change only a few things at a time. If they are confronted with too many recommendations for change, people can become discouraged and overwhelmed, with the result that nothing changes. Many feedback instruments suffer from information overload. Overload can be managed in either of two ways: reduce the number of practices on which feedback is provided, or direct people to choose no more than three to six practices to work on.

The combination of self-referenced, ipsative feedback provided in manageable units in group settings has typically been very effective in focusing people on improvement during the initial group feedback sessions, in developing effective plans for implementing change earlier, and in initiating supportive, open working relationships that carry over into the workplace. Furthermore, by positioning individual development, not in competition with the group but in the support of group success, ipsative-based coaching can create a stronger, more united culture.

**REFERENCES**


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Donald Tosti is the founding partner of Vanguard Consulting. He has an extensive and varied background in organizational improvement and for three decades has been a recognized expert in performance-based approaches to leadership development. He has worked with companies in the United States, the Middle East, and Europe. His consulting activities include work in culture change, cross-functional collaboration, and customer-focused behavior (internal branding), to name a few. He is perhaps best known for his work in feedback and organizational alignment. He has also written numerous book chapters and articles on human performance improvement and its application in today’s business world.

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