

Moment -to-Moment

Max walked in a couple minutes late and apologized. He greeted me and asked, “So you promised me that we would talk about coaching, right?”

“Yes. I did.”

“Good, I want some pointers because I just spent an hour with one of my direct reports solving a bunch of her team’s problems.”

“Did you solve them or did *she* solve them?”

Max paused and smiled. “Little of both, I guess.”

I smiled back, and was about to ask him to rewind the internal movie tape, when Max interrupted my thoughts.

He said, “Well, I think it was actually more of me telling her what to do; she was not getting anywhere, and going round and round. I actually didn’t realize all that she has been up against. She needed to be reeled in a bit.”

I thought it was a good time to bring up one of his past promises to himself. “Max, early last month, when we were talking about your personal legacy, you mentioned you

wanted to demonstrate more compassion. Where were you on the compassion barometer with her?”

“Medium to low, probably.”

“And what would make it medium to high?”

“Same old, same old. Got to slow down and ask more questions.”

“There’s something else, too. Your being good at problem solving serves you well in the operations side of your job. It’s not going to cut it when you are coaching.”

Max nodded. “Yeah, it’s the old saying, right? Give someone a fish, and they have food for a day; teach someone to fish, and they have food for a lifetime.”

I grinned. “Teaching someone to fish is one of the most sage-like things you can do. How often would you say, Max, you are teaching people to fish during a given week?”

“Not that much; I am solving problems most of the time, and moving to the next issue.”

“So would you say 5 percent of the time right now?”

“No, I wouldn’t even say that much.”

“OK, let’s say this: Of the time you spend with your direct reports, how much of that do you want to have ‘teach-to-fish’ conversations?”

“Definitely more than I do now; let’s say a third of the time.”

“Good, so you agree you want to teach to fish more. What do you need to do differently in order to coach more?”

Max shot back quickly with a grin on his face. “Ask a lot more questions, sort of like what you are doing now.”

Max seemed to like that he was on to me. I was probably overplaying the Socratic method. Yet I wanted to demonstrate that, once again, good questions work.

I responded, “Right. Sometimes, managers and executives don’t like to bother with a series of questions because they think giving the answer takes less time. And it does in the short term. But the long-term effects are discussions on the same subjects over and over. I like to hear leaders ask ‘What are your options?’ as the standard response when a direct report is looking for the answer.”

“Yeah, I do sometimes, when I’m not in a hurry.”

“The good news with you, Max, is that you believe coaching is important, and that you want to focus on it. As a general rule, when executives are coaching, they are doing it formally in one-on-ones for performance reviews or problem solving.”

“Yep.”

“I think you can coach informally as well, using the bits of time in between meetings, on the phone, or even in the parking lot to give feedback and help your direct reports deal with issues or solve problems quickly.”

“The parking lot – are you kidding?”

“The parking lot, the elevator, walking people to their next meeting, and stopping by your direct reports’ cubicles or offices. The key is to leverage the time you do have, to coach ‘anytime, anywhere.’”

Max stared at me in disbelief.

“Remember the end of our conversation last week: I promised you that coaching to the team’s vision would not take any extra time.”

“Yeah, I did not believe you then and I’m not sure I believe you now.”

“I don’t think coaching has to take any extra time, as long as you leverage the time you do have, whether it’s informal drop-bys or formally scheduled meetings with your direct reports. Did you ever read *The One Minute Manager* by Ken Blanchard?”

“yeah, a long time ago.”

“He advised managers to walk around a lot, to get out of your office. It’s more than that, because now given how virtual our work world is getting, we have to do ‘call-arounds,’ too, not just ‘walk-arounds.’”

Max thought for a moment, and asked, “Do you do this coaching ‘anytime, anywhere?’”

I nodded. “With my company’s staff, I do a lot of coaching in between client meetings on the cell phone in my car. Because the company is mostly virtual, a lot of my in-the-moment coaching is on the phone. Regarding clients, as you know, all my clients are welcome to call me anytime to do a quick ten-minute in-the-moment coaching sessions on the phone in between your regular weekly sessions.”

“It’s such a great concept, to coach on-the-fly or, as you say, in-the-moment. Yet, I know I don’t take advantage of the time in between meetings at all. I do like the idea of walking to the next meeting and solving a problem along the way. Actually, I do that now because people grab me after a

meeting to get my approval on a lot of things.” He paused. “But I wouldn’t call approving things coaching.”

“No, it’s operational management.” I hesitated a moment and then said, “I’m wondering how many of those ‘approval’ times could be turned into in-the-moment coaching opportunities.”

“I will pay more attention to this.”

I didn’t push Max for specifics and decided to guide the conversation to the content of coaching. “When you do coach, what are the issues you tend to talk about? Be as specific as you can.”

“Well, the obvious ones are problems that come up with my direct reports’ internal clients or issues that my direct reports have with their direct reports, like today.”

“Good. What about the vision you just created with your team? What kinds of questions could you ask about the vision in-the-moment as you are walking around?”

“Well, the whole point of the vision, like we discussed last week, has to do with putting it into practice. So I would ask about that. Something like, ‘How have you put the vision roadmap into practice?’ Max pondered the question more. “Or I could just ask, ‘What are you working on?’ and go from there.”

“Excellent. The hard part is taking the time to walk around and ask.”

“It definitely makes a lot of sense in between meetings, on my way from one to the next.”

“Not only is coaching important in terms of feedback on performance and problem solving, it’s also vital to sustain a

cultural shift like a vision. New visions take months to instill into the culture. It doesn't happen overnight, but through many coaching conversations – short ones and long ones.”

“I need to tell my directs to ask questions and coach their direct reports in order for this vision to take hold, right?”

“You could give them an edict or you could talk with them – like I'm talking with you now – about leveraging in-the-moment coaching opportunities ‘anytime, anywhere.’ Coaching is good for a lot of things: building vision and legacy, performance feedback, and solving problems.”

Now that Max had demonstrated that he understands some of the uses of coaching, I wanted to spend time with him on the process of coaching. “Would you like some pointers on *how* to coach effectively? These practices will help you coach well during your formal one-on-ones as well as during your walk-arounds.”

“Go for it.”

“As we have talked about, the core of any coaching is the ability to ask relevant, timely questions, but there's more to it than that. In-the-Moment Coaching – or ITM Coaching, for short – leverages coaching moment-to-moment.” I showed Max the three-step method. “It's simple to remember: *rappor*t, *assess*, *reframe*. It spells RAR.”

ITM Coaching Model

Rapport: Clear distractions and build rapport quickly by matching body language, voice tone, and tempo.

Assess: Clarify the situation to understand the issue and help “Set” the problem.

Reframe: Reframe words, thoughts, and actions to help others solve the problem.

I continued, “We have talked a lot about rapport already, when you were preparing for your interviews, remember?”

“Yes, and I think I am doing it regularly. I am especially focusing on what I want to get better at – matching tempo. I’m being more aware of slowing down to match the person I’m with.”

I smiled. “Great job, Max. Building rapport is especially imperative in coaching. It’s not just about matching behavior – in your case, slowing down – it’s also about clearing distractions. Perhaps more than any other time in your day, when you are coaching you have to be focused and totally present with the other person.”

“So once again, you are asking me to slow down.”

“You got it – slow down so you can demonstrate a special concentration. You want the other person to be the model? Isn’t that like inquiry, like we talked about before?” Max asked.

“Yes and no. The skill of assess in coaching is not just about asking questions to clarify what the other person’s situation is. It’s those things and more. When you assess, it’s also important to *set* the problem so you can help your direct report get unstuck and eventually *solve* the problem.”

“What do you mean set the problem?”

“Take the situation you started with this afternoon: You said one of your direct reports needed to be ‘reeled in.’”

“Yeah, definitely, she had three different things going on. One of her engineers has a performance issue, another wants to be promoted, and another has quit.”

“So do you have some choices about which issue to work on with her. Setting the problem is like priority setting. Your job as a coach is to listen, let the person vent for a while, and then help the individual decide which path to go down. Which one is the most important right then? Which one can be solved with your help?” I paused to let Max take this in.

“I’m thinking about another conversation that I had late last week. Setting the problem would have come in handy. One of my direct reports was really upset during our regular one-on-one. He spent the first ten minutes venting about a variety of issues.”

“What could you do the next time in order to set one of those problems before you and he start to solve it?”

“I should ask him, ‘Which issue do you want to address now?’”

“Good; it’s direct. Before you ask that question, you may want to summarize what you are hearing, like, ‘You have mentioned these three things,’ and then name them. And

then ask what you said, ‘Which issue do you want to address now?’”

“That’s a good one.”

“Will you try this out next week?” I asked.

“Yeah, I will. If it comes up.”

I wanted to be sure there are no hindrances to Max practicing the skill. “Are you sure you want to take this on?”

“I’m just not sure how much opportunity there will be.”

“Look for the opportunity in places you don’t expect. Walk one of your direct reports to his or her next meeting instead of jumping on your PDA.”

“OK.” Max looked down at his notes. “What about the reframe part of ITM Coaching? WE didn’t talk about that yet.”

“Let’s talk about that next week. For now, I want to focus on the assess aspect coaching: (1) asking good questions to understand the situation, and (2) setting the problem. We will look at ways to reframe when we get together next time.”

Max deadpanned, “So, you don’t want me to solve problems this week?”

I tried not to laugh, because I needed to give him an important suggestion: “No, I want you to focus on asking good questions and see if the people you are engaging solve the problem themselves.”

“OK, I’ll see how that works. See you next week.”