

Coaching from an Adult Ego State

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A key determinate of your effectiveness as a coach depends on your ability to create a climate that promotes personal rapport and open dialogue. This is accomplished primarily through the style of your communication with the other person.

To better understand this, think of a coaching conversation as a series of transactions, where one party speaks and the other responds. Notice the nature of the transactions contained in the following conversation:

Situation: A physician new to the practice is having difficulty in working with the office administrator and is looking for advice from a senior colleague.

New Physician: "I don't think Mary is being very cooperative. I keep asking her to do some things differently on the front desk and she just refuses to cooperate. I don't know what to do."

Physician Coach: "Well, why haven't you tried talking to her about it?"

New Physician: "I have, but every time I do she gets defensive and we just end up arguing."

Physician Coach: "You need to be more patient with her. If you're going to be successful here, you've got to be able to handle situations like this. If you can't, it's going to limit your effectiveness."

New Physician: "Yeah, but she needs to cooperate as well."

Physician Coach: "I agree, but that's not the point. The point is that you're the physician, and you've got to be the one to take the first step and lead the way."

New Physician: "I have and it hasn't worked."

Physician Coach: "Then you've just got to be more persistent."

Notice the tone of these transactions. The coach clearly is communicating in a way that suggests a superior/subordinate relationship.

The attitude, tone, and type of statements used in a conversation reflect what is referred to in psychology as an ego state. There are three ego states out of which you can communicate:

1. A parent ego state
2. An adult ego state
3. A child ego state

Each one has its uses and is appropriate for different situations:

A parent ego state is characterized by an "I know better" attitude. It contains absolute statements, indications of criticism, the use of "shoulds," direct or implied threats, and a parental tone of voice and non-verbal behavior.

An adult ego state conveys an attitude of power equalization and collegiality. It contains statements that are exploratory without being judgmental, solution-oriented but in a collaborative way, and a tone that is emotionally neutral and promotes non-defensiveness.

A child ego state communication is spontaneous, uninhibited, emotional, and often fun-loving. It is a



mindset that reflects spontaneity of feelings and behaviors, or deference and compliance.

In order to build rapport and open dialogue in a coaching conversation it is imperative that you communicate out of an adult ego state. In the above example, the coach clearly is communicating out of a parent ego state as illustrated by his statements:

- “Well, why haven’t you tried talking to her about it?” — implied criticism (you should have if you haven’t already).
- “You need to be more patient with her. If you’re going to be successful here, you’ve got to be able to handle situations like this. If you can’t, it’s going to limit your effectiveness.” —the use of “should,” absolute statements, and implied warnings; delivered in a lecturing tone.

Adult-to-adult communication begins with a conscious effort to manage your tone-of-voice and body language so that they are devoid of judgment and implied superiority. Listen to yourself. Do you sound like a parent when you talk?

- “Then you’ve just got to be more persistent.” — a directive with an “I know better” attitude.

Although well-meaning, the coach has unintentionally reduced his effectiveness through the use of a parent ego state style of communication. Learning to communicate out of an adult ego state in these types of conversations is a critical competency. So, how do you do it?

Adult-to-adult communication begins with a conscious effort to manage your tone-of-voice and body language so that they are devoid of judgment and implied superiority. Listen to yourself. Do you sound like a parent when you talk?

Think of a conversation as a song that contains both words and music. Managing the music of your conversation sets the tone for an adult-to-adult interaction.

Second, manage the words to the song by following these three simple rules:

- Separate facts from opinions. Stating an opinion as a fact is what parents do, e.g., “That idea won’t work” is an opinion stated as if it were an objective fact. Better to say “In my opinion that idea won’t work.”
- Own your own feelings. Describe your reaction to situations rather

than blaming others for your feelings. For example, “You disappointed me when I didn’t get the information on time” is more accusatory than “I felt disappointed when I didn’t get the information on time.” The first statement assigns blame for your feelings to the other person (indicative of a parent ego state), while the second is simply a legitimate description of your reaction.

- Think and speak in terms of preferences rather than “shoulds.” “You should show more restraint in expressing your opinions” is a more judgmental than “I would prefer that you show more restraint in expressing more opinions.” (“Shoulding” is characteristic of the parent ego state)

Using these rules and an adult ego state, how would the conversa-

tion between the coach and the new physician have sounded differently?

New Physician: “I don’t think Mary is being very cooperative. I keep asking her to do some things differently on the front desk and she just refuses to cooperate. I don’t know what to do.”

Physician Coach: “What have you tried so far?”

New Physician: “I’ve tried giving her the benefit of the doubt.”

Physician Coach: “Have you thought that it may be just a matter of being more patient with her? What I’ve found in my experience is that learning to handle situations like this is very important to being effective with the office staff.”

New Physician: “Yes, but she needs to cooperate as well.”

Physician Coach: “I agree. And I would prefer that as a physician you

take the first step because I think it will lead the way.”

New Physician: “I have and it hasn’t worked.”

Physician Coach: “Well, it may be just a matter of being more persistent. What do you think?”

Notice the different tone the conversation takes when the coach communicates out of the adult ego state. It is truly a more collegial, adult-to-adult conversation, and one that is more likely to get the new physician to stop and consider what his colleague is encouraging him to do.

Self-awareness is crucial to any leader’s success. As a coach-leader, being aware of your communication style and staying in the adult ego state during a coaching conversation will help create a climate conducive to listening and mutual problem-solving.

Admittedly, it is not always easy to do, particularly when the subject matter is emotionally charged, but it is nevertheless an essential condition for inducing change in the other person.



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