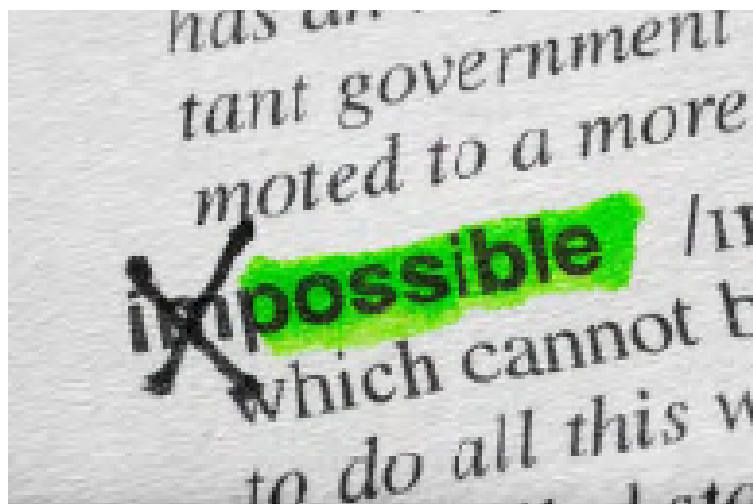




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Coaching as Organisational Development



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A High-performing Factory via Solution-focused Coaching: a Case Study

PaoloTerni



Coaching deployment and execution in a factory-based lean production OD project.

How solution-focused coaching played an important role in helping Sanpellegrino's Cepina bottling factory achieve the status of High-Performing Factory within Nestle' Waters.

Keywords

Solution-Focused Coaching, HPF, Lean Production, Team Leaders, Development Center, Sanpellegrino.

Background

In 2003, Nestle' Waters launched a world-wide OD program for its factories, called HPF - *High Performance Factory*. It was a well-organized effort that included different activities to improve key performance indicators (KPIs) using a Lean-Production approach.

Sanpellegrino, the well-known Italian bottled-water company, as part of Nestle Waters, operates seven factories in Italy, each with its own brand-name. One of the best known brands is Levissima, bottled high in the Alps near the ski resort of Bormio, in Cepina, Italy.

One of the key tenets of *Lean Production* is for the factory to have a flat hierarchical structure - managerial competences need to be spread "downwards". At Levissima, *Production Teams* needed to be formed and *Team Leaders* needed to be selected and trained.

The factory managers realized that the set of skills required of Team Leaders was different from the set of skills required of their "Machine Conductors" (*Macchinisti*) - their only current intermediate level among workers, a title which was awarded to people with solid technical expertise but very basic people skills.

Therefore they hired a consulting company, *Festo CTE*, to help them select *Team*

Leaders among their workers and then train them. As a consultant who frequently worked for Festo CTE in running *Development Centers* and in coaching managers, I was asked to be Project Leader.

The Project

Step 1: The Development Center

“What ...struck the consultants was the complete absence of women”

The first step was to run a *Development Center* to select workers who had the best chance to be successful as Team Leaders. A *Development Center* is similar to an *Assessment Center*: participants are asked to simulate certain situations and the consultants observe their actual performances; different kinds of tests are then administered to the participants, together with an in-depth interview. What makes a *Development Center* different from an *Assessment Center* is that in the former the focus is on what the person might be able to achieve in the future if given the opportunity and what his or her strengths are, while in the latter the focus is on evaluating what a person can do right now.

The goal of the *Development Center* was to select a group of 30 people to be trained as Team Leaders, from a total population of about 450 employees (about 250 of them seasonal workers). The factory management made a preliminary screening based on internal criteria, and supplied the consultants with a list of 68 candidates.

What immediately struck the consultants was the complete absence of women on the list, despite the fact that a good 60% of workers there were female. Backed by Sanpellegrino Headquarters, the consultants demanded that some women be included in the list - the objection that it was a “man’s job” was groundless, since it did not involve any more physical effort than that of a regular worker.

I mention this fact to give readers an idea of the cultural backdrop against which change had to take place. We were working in a conservative and socially tightly-knit environment, in an alpine valley, where everybody knew everybody else and furthermore, where things were complicated by the thick web of family relationships among workers.

In the end, we got a revised list of 81 people. The team of 3 consultants ran 9 development centers of 1.5 days each over a period of two months. After elaborating the data and after intensive consultations, the team of consultants presented their findings to Factory Management and to representatives of Sanpellegrino Headquarters HR. Incidentally, our number one pick was a 31-year old woman who was a seasonal worker! Despite the initial shock, we must give credit to Factory Management - they promptly proceeded to hire her full-time and to enroll her in our development program.

Having the same consultants who selected the Team Leaders responsible for their

training and coaching was a bonus for the project - usually consultants who run assessment centers deliver their evaluations and then they move on to other projects. This time around they needed to work with whoever they picked, so whatever karma they got out of their choice was theirs to deal with!

Step 2: Training

“coaching was essential to help them survive their new role”

The main criteria for selecting the group of 30 were the candidates' interpersonal skills. Since the Team Leaders needed to run the team without having a hierarchical role and institutional leverage, it was essential they had basic skills in communication, negotiation, and emotional intelligence to keep the team well-oiled and to influence the team members to perform at their best.

The training was limited to 3 half-day workshops to give participants some basic tools for improving their communication and conflict resolution skills. It was more an orientation to their new role and responsibilities than anything else. We were all agreed that their credibility would be acquired in the field, and coaching was essential to help them survive and thrive in their new role.

Step 3: Coaching

With Factory Management we agreed to focus our coaching sessions to help the freshly-minted team-leaders handle three crucial steps that signified the depth of the cultural change on the Levissima factory floor.

The 3 crucial steps were:

1) Leading the 5-minute team debrief at the end of the work-shift.

The goal of the team debrief was to review what happened during the shift and what problems were encountered that might affect the upcoming work-shift. This was a very challenging task: the first obstacle was to actually get the workers to stay there for 5 minutes and not rush to the locker room to get changed and go home. And on top of that the Team Leaders needed to figure out the best way to involve the workers, to ask them relevant questions, and to collect their input.

2) Supporting team members in performing quality control operations.

Quality checks in the HPF design were pushed down the production line rather than being performed by Quality Assurance personnel. The challenge for the Team Leaders was to train fellow team members to carry out basic sampling operations and fill out QA documents - moreover, it involved changing the attitude of many of the team members, who firmly believed this was not their job, but was a task for the “white coats”.

3) Delivering timely feedback to team members.

This was a strong signal that their role had changed: they were Team Leaders.

“the coach did not behave conventionally, taking instead a hands-on approach and sharing the work environment with his coaches”

So it was their job to tell team members what they did right and what they did wrong.

Organizational changes were also put in place to allow Team Leaders to perform the above steps. For example, they would attend the 30-minute daily production meeting with the Factory Management so they would be aware of the priorities and of the big picture; this allowed them to understand the reasoning behind some requests and therefore equipped them to “sell” the production schedule changes to their teams.

Product Line Managers were involved too - they were invited to increase their presence on the line, to interact frequently with the Team Leaders, so that the Team Leaders’ role was boosted in the eyes of the other team members.

How the Coaching went

Coaching structure.

We held coaching sessions in small groups of three or four Team Leaders – with group composition varying depending on their work schedule. On average, each Team Leader was able to attend 5 of these coaching sessions. Coaching sessions usually included a 60-minute group conversation, a 20 minute walkabout of their lines to take notes about what was going on and an additional 10 minutes of feedback - a total of 90 minutes. The coachees greatly appreciated that the coach was willing to walk the factory floor with them.

The coach also interacted with other workers to establish a climate of trust and shared understanding that we were all learning a new way of working: the coach in supporting his coachees right there in the front lines; Team Leaders were learning how to be leaders; team members were learning to be a thinking part of the production process rather than mere operatives.

In short, the coach did not behave conventionally, taking instead a hands-on approach and sharing the work environment with his coachees. While maintaining total confidentiality, the coach did not need complete privacy - something not encouraged in the manuals, but which in this case worked beautifully.

Solution-Focused Coaching: what worked.

The coaches followed a solution-focused coaching protocol, in keeping with the strength-based approach of the assessment team in the Development Center. In SF coaching the client is deemed to be the expert, so rather than offering advice, the coach asks questions to help coachees access their own experience.

In this case, coachees had a lot of work experience and were very knowledgeable both about the production process and the peculiar alpine culture that permeated the production site. The coach would have struggled to formulate any sound advice

in such a setting.

In SF coaching the focus is on the future and on what coachees want to achieve. This gave coachees freedom to explore how they wanted to be Team Leaders and what kind of Team Leaders they wanted to be.

*“the solution was to
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Last but not least, SF coaching focuses on exceptions to problems, rather than on analyzing problems. This proved a fruitful line of inquiry when Team Leaders were trying to find out how to deal with specific team members who were “difficult”. All Team Leaders had had many interactions over the years with each other and with team members, so it was easy, by following this line of thought, to come up with exceptions and useful strategies.

Coaching results.

Here is a summary of how the coaching went in regard to the 3 key tasks:

End of shift 5-minute debrief:

At first, Team Leaders were supplied by thoughtful Factory Management with a pre-formatted flip chart as a tool to facilitate the debrief and as way to organize the information gathered. It seemed to all to be an excellent idea. But as always, excellent ideas need to survive their impact with reality.

While the pre-formatted flip-chart helped to shore up Team Leaders' confidence at first, it rapidly became apparent that this solution was not working: the format was similar to documents the workers were already supposed to fill out, so the whole thing was perceived as a waste of time and just another “stupid ritual”. The actual purpose of the debrief was not so much that of collecting measurable data, something already available through other channels - rather, it was to collect the little tiny signals that escape formal reporting or technical monitoring but that are very important in predicting machine anomalies and breakdowns - small signals that only people who work day in and day out with the same machine could detect. Also, the debrief should have highlighted team interactions, dynamics and organization.

Once it was decided to get rid of the pre-formatted flip-chart and to use a plain white one, things started moving in the right direction. Prompted by the coach's questions, coachees explored different solutions and exchanged practical experiences on how to lead such a debrief - in the end, each Team Leader found his or her own style of involving his or her former peers and getting the job done. For many Team Leaders, the solution was to frame the conversation in terms and language that would matter to their peers - something they knew well how to do. So instead of talking in engineering terms they would talk about the details of routine operations on a specific machine, and the state of that machine. Also, many found out it was very helpful to frame the reason for

“Sometimes coaching can help, sometimes organizational solutions are required”

collecting such information as a service to their colleagues taking over in the next shift, just as they had the same kind of courtesy from colleagues preceding them.

For a few of the more assertive and technically-oriented Team Leaders, a barrage of probing questions based on what they observed seemed to work best - and despite the apparent dryness of the debrief, what was appreciated by team members was the attention the Team Leaders demonstrated they had for them and their plight.

Supporting team members in Quality Assurance operations:

In the planning stage, we thought this might prove the easiest step to achieve, but it turned out to be a tough nut to crack. The main reason was that Team Leaders had problems themselves in getting used to performing those checks - the training from the QA people proved too abstract for the target group. They were able to give very little support to their team mates, some of whom jumped on the issue as a major flaw in the project. Many different solutions were found by Team Leaders during the coaching sessions, but they all involved the support of the QA people, who at this point thought their task was finished and seldom responded to Team Leaders' request of support, thus undermining the Team Leaders' credibility.

After consultations with Factory Management, we took a step back. A QA junior person was assigned the task of training Team Leaders and team members, one team at a time, on the job, for the whole shift. The process took much longer than anticipated at first, then, but in the end it worked. Sometimes coaching can help, sometimes organisational solutions are required. Again, we must give credit to Factory Management for assigning such a high priority to the project to be willing to detach a QA person full-time to get the job done.

Delivering timely feedback to team members:

Coaching, and more specifically Solution-Focused coaching, was especially effective in helping Team-Leaders deliver feedback. The task seemed intimidating if framed as “delivering feedback” - it had all sorts of negative connotations, with Team Leaders suspecting it would put a barrier between them and their team members, even amounting to a punitive stance towards fellow workers. An SF line of inquiry allowed coachees to come up with a learning rather than a punishing frame (feedback as a learning tool); and moreover, instead of asking them to adhere to a specific feedback protocol, the coaching allowed Team Leaders to find in their own experiences with specific individuals what worked and what did not work. Even more importantly, by using their previous experiences in interacting with colleagues, Team Leaders

established continuity with the past: feedback conversations flowed more naturally. They were no longer perceived as something that marked a divide between them and their teammates but just as a different kind of conversation, building on many other conversations in the past.

Overall results:

“coachees need to experience the problem so they can experience the need for coaching”

The implementation of the HPF project in the Levissima production site was a complex effort involving many different people in different capacities. Overall it was a success, meeting the KPIs that were set by Nestle Waters Headquarters even though it took 6 months longer than planned.

Coaching & OD: lessons learned

Coaching was one piece of a solution in a complex scenario. It met 2 out of 3 OD goals, and it indirectly led to an organizational solution to reach the 3rd goal. Coaching was well received by the coachees for the following reasons:

- A working relationship between the coach and the coachees had already been established during the Development Center; in that setting, coachees experienced first-hand how the focus of the work was their own professional development and nothing more. No hidden agendas.
- Coaching was introduced as a way of helping them once they were already facing problems, i.e. first they were given the new role and thrown into the field, then they were offered the opportunity of having a coach to help them meet the challenges they were facing. I believe this is a key success factor. First, coachees need to experience the problem so they can experience the need for coaching. In this scenario, management does not need to sell coaching - quite the opposite, management can play the role of the saviour by graciously offering them this much-needed support.
- The coaching initiative was presented in a kick-off meeting with all the coachees present. Factory Management explained the purpose of the coaching, and framed the intervention as something to help coachees meet their goals as Team Leaders. The party line was “we do not want to leave you alone”. The coach introduced the concept of coaching, what to expect and the ground-rules
- During the kick-off meeting, Factory Management established a clear unbroken link that connected the 3 areas of coaching with the project’s KPIs. It was re-iterated by the coach that while the goals were given, it was up to each Team Leader how they would reach them. Similarly, progress of the group as a whole would be shared with management, while individual progress and details of coaching conversations would be kept private.
- Team Leaders were instructed to tell team members why the consultant would sometimes visit the lines, and what the coach was doing - a further

message to everyone that everybody was in a learning mode. Simultaneously, it conveyed the message that the OD effort was serious.

- Congruent with the idea that coaching was supportive, coachees were given the chance to opt out of coaching at any time. Nobody did. The same option was given to workers originally selected in the Development Center to become Team Leaders, and some of them did. So the coach was working with a population that had volunteered for the new role and volunteered to have a coach. That helped.

About the author

Paolo Terni, B.A., M.Sc., is a ICF-certified PCC executive & life coach and a member of Solutionsurfers' Brief-Coach Training faculty. He has extensive experience in training managers and executives in leadership, self-governance & interpersonal skills within the framework of OD projects. Currently based in California, Paolo Terni is committed to making change easier for organizations, teams and individuals.

E: briefcoachingsolutions@gmail.com

T: +1-925-349-8629

W: www.briefcoachingsolutions.com

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