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Foreword

Leadership by coaching is all the rage. Performance management has been implemented in many organisations and is becoming *the* method of leadership. It is geared to helping employees develop greater independence.

Coaching demands from you, as a manager, that you change your fundamental attitude; control and command will then make way for the development of people. You will be expected to free the potential of your employees and get the best out of them. This will also be beneficial to your organisation.

In my work as a trainer, I frequently see just how difficult it is for managers to take on the role of a coaching manager. They often have the idea that they should know everything and should be able to solve all their employees' problems, and they are used to doing just that. They find it difficult to delegate because they think they'll lose control or, even worse, be held responsible for their employees' mistakes. They think that they should treat and direct every employee in the same way, while all employees are different and often need a different kind of challenge for their development. Making definite, transparent agreements with the commitment of another person is an issue that causes many problems on a daily basis.

Coaching-style leadership is meant to support you in your process of becoming increasingly professional. It is not meant to tell you how things should be done, but allow you to think about how you direct and coach your employees and how you can implement improvement.

Chapter 1 is about the aspects of communication. What is observation and how do you colour your observations? It's about language and body language, about meta programmes that influence your behaviour and finally about points of special interest with regard to effective discussions; the basis of coaching your employees is being able to observe and communicate well. In Chapter 2, I pay attention to the communicative skills of giving and receiving feedback that are needed to direct, compliment and, if necessary, reprimand your employees. Chapter 3 is about coaching in general. What is coaching and what is the basic attitude that is a part of it? This chapter is also about situational leadership as a method for developing your employees on their way to independence, and about delegating.

I discuss the various intervention styles of coaching in Chapter 4; examples of discussions illustrate the fact that there are large variations in the way you hold discussions with your employees and stress the importance of changing your style where necessary to obtain a better result. Performance management, the combination of results-oriented management and competence management, is discussed in Chapter 5. This management style belongs to coaching-style leadership, as it is geared to obtaining results and to the development of employees. In chapter 6, I examine the various discussions that are part of the coaching cycle: the year plan discussion, the progress or performance interview, the assessment interview and a number of other discussions you may need to hold when supervising your employees. Finally, I pay attention to a specific task of managers – the supervising of employees during absence and reintegration.

I do hope you enjoy reading this book and that it contributes to your personal development as a coaching manager.

Marieta Koopmans

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Aspects of communication

As a manager, you are expected to hold talks with your employees on a regular basis. These talks will sometimes have a formal character but will sometimes be more impromptu. The direction these talks take depends on the people involved and the way in which they associate with each other. Some people talk about trivial matters, making small talk without trouble and have an enjoyable conversation within two minutes, while others can easily listen attentively to various problems for a long time. All of us think that what we do is logical and natural; if you have an introverted nature, for example, you'll find it logical not to react exuberantly. We all have certain assumptions because of which particular behaviour becomes 'normal' to us. We all have our own logic and draw our own conclusions: certain ways of thinking, assumptions, and the things we take for granted largely determine our behaviour. Those assumptions can be partly down to our upbringing and partly to personal experiences and learning processes. We usually acquire the ideas which lead us to unwittingly limit our behaviour repertoire quite unconsciously. You can teach yourself techniques with which to increase your communicative potential; however, if you really want to increase your behaviour repertoire, it's important to study your own personal logic, the basic assumptions and beliefs that make your behaviour and reactions habitual and matter-of-course.

Observation

Our way of reacting is influenced, among other things, by the trust we place in our own observations. Generally speaking, we think that:

- What we observe is a reliable, objective reproduction of what is actually happening in the world around us.
- We know the world very well. Things are as they are, and we see them as they are.
- We can therefore confidently meet other people; we know what we are doing, after all...

What we see is determined by the position from which we view things. A manager sees his or her organisation in a different way from a caretaker. We can never be sure if what we see is 'real' or imaginary. We have to make a clear distinction between observation and interpretation, between what we really see and how we interpret it, and what meaning we give to it.

Observation has the following characteristics:

Observation is limited.

We observe with our senses, but we can never see, hear or feel everything. We have only limited senses compared, for instance, to animals (smell), but examples of optical illusions also make that clear.

Observation is selective.

We see what we want to see and, relating to our background, what we are prepared to see. Experiences have left their traces and they influence us. We learn from experiences and that ability to learn makes us less open-minded and more pre-programmed.

Observations are therefore not made in an open-minded way, but are specifically directed; constant colouring, assessment and selection take place. With this, we actively structure our experiences (actively is not, incidentally, the same as consciously).

Observation is stable.

Thanks to language, we have concepts at our disposal that bring structure to our observations. We know what a ball or a computer is and what they look like. Because of this, we have an organised, stable world. Without that stability, our existence would have a chaotic, unpredictable character because every situation would be new.

Observations form a meaningful whole.

Due to their connection with past experiences and events, we recognise things and can give them a place in our thoughts and actions. If this was not the case, all phenomena would exist separately from each other and there would be no connection. Everything would be a surprise and nothing would seem familiar. Because of the known and familiar, we can determine our attitude with respect to the events of which we are a part.

An objective observer, therefore, does not exist. We play an active role in the events that happen to us. Observations are always received through a filter: the personal frame of reference based on standards and values, past experiences, knowledge, insight and interests. Because of this, we attribute meaning to that which we see or hear. We are quickly inclined, moreover, to attribute a positive or negative charge or value to what we observe. This process of observing, interpreting and judging determines our reaction.

OBSERVING OTHER PEOPLE

Whatever applies to observing objects also applies to observing people. In addition, however, a number of special influences are involved. What is special about social observation is that we, as observers, do not just dwell upon outward behavioural characteristics, but – proceeding from those characteristics – keep on searching for an explanation for the behaviour of the other person. Starting from our process of observation, we always have an opinion, judgement or belief. With these, we search for causes and explanations of other people's behaviour.

We usually find these in the intentions, motives or individual characteristics of the other individual. What is remarkable about this is that we cannot see motives, intentions or individual characteristics directly, but we do – often quickly – come up with a verdict. We 'easily' deduce an inner state from the outwardly perceptible behaviour of others (obviously from our own assumptions and selectivity). Behaviour and communication with others is strongly influenced by the way in which we observe others and that observation is selective.

OBSERVING YOURSELF

Everything that has been mentioned before is also applicable to the way in which you observe yourself. We observe ourselves as a (reasonably) stable unit with a considerable amount of permanency. The experiences we have teach us something about ourselves, and they ensure that an image of who we are slowly comes into being. However, what we see and do when observing others is, usually unintentionally, different from what we do with regard to ourselves. Where we are inclined to attribute the behaviour of other people to various internal factors (individual characteristics, motives, emotions, etc.) we are more likely to seek the cause of our own behaviour outside of ourselves. This tendency sheds a very special light on the whole idea that people are able to observe things accurately!

If we look at the characteristics of observation and the way in which we observe both others and ourselves, we can then argue that reactions to certain matters say more about the person who is reacting than about the event to which they are reacting. A number of conclusions can be attached to that proposition:

- The other is not the cause of my emotions and reactions.
- The other is therefore never responsible for my emotions: I am, myself.
- If I want to understand my reactions, I will have to obtain insight into my own way of thinking.
- If I want to make it clear to others why I react in a certain way, I will also have to explain how I think and what is important to me.
- If I want to change my reactions, I can only do so by changing my way of thinking.

Take a moment to think about these conclusions and consider their meaning in your everyday life. What would change for you if you agreed with these conclusions?

PROCESSES THAT COLOUR OBSERVATION

A number of factors that colour our observation have been mentioned before. In the most favourable case, these internal processes ensure that our observation is awarded the right meaning. In the most unfavourable case, these processes can restrict, distort or twist reality. The following processes are also an influence – next to selection, previous experiences, upbringing, cultural background and the social role that filters observation.

1. Projection

This is subconsciously and with great certainty ascribing your own characteristics and motives to others. We place outside that which is within; a person who is very nervous, for example, will soon find his colleagues nervous. The assurance with which remarks are made about other people makes it almost impossible for the others to feel that they are really 'seen' as they are. Common projections:

- He's not to be trusted.
- You're only doing that to get your own back.
- You want to have it your own way.
- They don't mind waiting.
- He didn't speak to me, he must be angry.
- I'm sure he's playing a power game.
- You're not interested in how I feel.

2. Personal norms

We are inclined to compare the behaviour of others to how we would do things ourselves, to take our own behaviour as the norm. This often defines what we see as good or less good, but can also distort reality at the same time as we are not able to place things in the right perspective. If you work hard, for instance, you will find people who work in an ordinary way rather lazy.

3. Preconceptions

Preconceptions are dictated by emotions and previous experiences. It is clear that they stand in the way of a rational judgement. All of us have preconceptions; it is a common human trait. Therefore, we need to search for our own preconceptions and examine them critically. Many preconceptions are based on outward appearances and on unfounded or premature notions.

- He has red hair so he must be temperamental.
- He's from the north and must be dour.
- He was a teacher, so he's probably authoritarian.
- If somebody has a weak handshake, you can't trust them.
- People without specific hobbies are not goal-oriented.

4. Stereotyping

Due to this mechanism, you lump whole groups together by giving those who belong to a certain group fixed qualities or characteristics.

- English people keep themselves to themselves.
- Dentists only work to become rich.

Thinking in stereotypes perpetuates the existing balance of power and consequently limits the contribution of other people.

5. Halo (and horns) effect

Because of this mechanism, one good (or less good) characteristic or impression radiates to a positive (or negative) total judgement. Examples:

- Once a thief, always a thief.
- He plays football so he's probably a sociable person.

6. Completion

Completion takes place when we fill up gaps or group the unknown into recognisable categories. If you are unaware of the distorting effect of insufficient information, you will be in danger of interpreting things in a familiar direction ('another impatient person').

7. First impressions

First impressions also colour our observations. Our first observations are often the deciding factor, rather than those that come up later. Hardly anybody resists the temptation to go by a first impression. It's important for you to be aware of this.

8. Emotions

Emotions can strongly influence observation. The more we are inspired, the greater the distortion of what we observe. When you strongly identify with somebody else (a master, a sports person) for example, you will mainly take in positive information. If you hear anything negative about this person, you will scarcely be able to believe it. When we take decisions, we must remember that our observation of the situation will often be inaccurate and distorted if our emotions are strongly involved.

9. Group pressure

Group pressure plays an important role in the distortion of observation. People prefer to surround themselves with others who have similar opinions. Although it is pleasant to be with like-minded people, 'always agreeing' can be detrimental to creativity in work situations ('groupthink'). Company blindness and an atmosphere in which dissident opinions are not tolerated have disastrous consequences for both people and organisations.

CRITERIA FOR ASSESSING YOUR OBSERVATION

How do you find out if your observation is strongly coloured or not? If you are talking about yourself and whatever's going on your own head or if you are talking about another person? You can use a number of criteria to test your observation:

- The extent to which various observers make the same statements (= measurement of consensus).
- The extent to which a statement fits into the pattern of statements previously made by the same person (= measure of consistency).
- The extent of the situations in which a person shows similar behaviour or has made similar statements (= measure of distinction).

It is also important to examine your own observations with regard to the processes that colour it. You can do this, for example, by paying attention to your own default reactions or statements.

Questions for reflection

- Think, for example, of your manager or a particular employee. With catchwords, describe what you think is characteristic of their behaviour.
 - What are the similarities and the differences?
 - Test this description afterwards against both the facts and your opinion.
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Language and body language

We are inclined to view thinking, language, and behaviour as separate but existing next to each other. They can, in fact, *not* be seen as separate from each other; they influence each other and in this way form an integrated whole. In our culture, we are brought up to have an immense trust in language. We have words for everything and use them as matter-of-fact, reliable resources. We react strongly to words: they influence our emotions, our ways of thinking and behaving. We summon up reactions by the words we choose or, at any rate, make that possible.

However, words point – just like observation – to assumptions. Think, for example, of the influence on your way of thinking, feeling or acting when you compare the following phrases:

This task is difficult

This task is impossible

His behaviour is childish

His behaviour is uncontrollable

Because of the way we name certain things, we also influence the way we use them. Next to the naturalness of using language, we have also developed a number of patterns in our way of communicating. These patterns complicate communication with others, rather than make it easier. Interpreting has become a kind of second nature; we interpret silently and automatically. We no longer think about our own assumptions or our way of thinking and drawing conclusions. This has become matter of fact; we react 'normally'. The image we have of ourselves is characteristic of this: we usually find ourselves open, truthful and direct. We may say that we speak plainly, but we do not realise that this is more often wishful thinking than reality.

Language has a variety of functions and can be used with different intentions:

The informative function

Language is used, among other things, for conveying information as accurately and completely as possible. In this case, descriptions that can be verified and contain as few evaluations, interpretations and conclusions as possible.

The social function

Language is also used to build relationships with other people or to confirm them. This function isn't about the contents of the words but about the tone and interchange. It has more to do with the confirmation of the relationship and keeping existing channels open: the creating and continuing of a kind of communality.

The directive function

Language can be used to influence others. This is especially the case when it comes to assignments and requests, but we also make statements in the hope that they will influence other people's thoughts and the way they behave. 'You are a valuable colleague' is an example of such a statement. These usually have a future characteristic.

The affective function

Language can be a way of expressing emotions or summoning emotional experiences. It is usually not about obtaining certain behaviour but more about creating a certain atmosphere.

Language as release

In some cases, language can be used as a means of expressing yourself emotionally. This is often used to distance yourself from something that has happened.

The various functions usually overlap each other in practice, or quickly follow each other. However, each function has its own possibility for application and therefore needs different skills and ways of behaviour. A social chat needs a different approach from delivering a difficult message.