

A man in a grey suit, white shirt, and striped tie is holding a black and white soccer ball with both hands. The background is a clear blue sky with some greenery visible at the bottom.

How Your High School Soccer Coach is Helping You Shape the Workforce of the Future

By Leah Wolfeld, M.S., Lisa Steelman, Ph.D., and Jim Gallo, M.S., SPHR

"Keep your eye on the ball."

"Play that section again, and make the notes shorter."

"Concentrate on what we worked on."

Many of us have heard similar phrases from coaches and teachers in our K-12 extracurricular activities like athletics, music, theater, dance, chess, or debate. Yet despite our dedication to our activity and perhaps great success during our youth, the vast majority of us do not continue on to become professionals in these fields. Rather, we sideline the activity to hobbyville if we are lucky and specialize in another area that is perhaps more stable, less taxing, and presents less stringent competition. All the same, lessons learned during years of soccer practice or marching band can surface on the job because to some extent, these activities influenced our development and thus who we are today. For example, discipline, teamwork skills, and refined attention to detail are skills applicable to the

workplace that you may have learned largely from your activity. Another, perhaps unexpected, learning point applicable to the workplace is your experience being coached.

What made your *best* coach great? What did you value about your relationship with him or her? What do you value about yourself in adulthood that you learned from your coach? What skills and life lessons did you learn, and how did your coach convey them to you? How does this translate to your behavior as a manager, leader, or subordinate?

In a recent study, we asked supervisors to tell us about their experiences being coached as a youth and their current preferences for coaching and feedback in the workplace. We also

asked their employees to tell us about the effectiveness of the coaching and feedback behaviors of their supervisor. From this information, we were able to determine the impact of being coached as a youth on a manager's current feedback preferences and coaching behaviors. The first thing that emerged from the data is that not all early coaching experiences are the same. Some managers reported receiving high quality coaching when they were younger, while other managers reported the coaching they received was much less effective.

High quality coaching experiences were defined as those in which the individual being coached, or protégé, received direct and specific feedback targeted to their performance level, felt encouraged

after receiving feedback, felt inspired and motivated by his or her coach, and worked with the coach to set short and long-term goals. We found a number of parallels between characteristics of those with high quality experience being coached (rather than simply time spent being coached or personal dedication to the activity) and the likelihood of becoming an effective manager and coach to direct reports. Moreover, we found that exposure to coaching during critical developmental periods predicted adult coaching behavior in the workplace.

Feedback Orientation

Coaches help their protégés improve by providing constructive feedback. Some people are naturally receptive to feedback (called feedback orientation), and research suggests that these people are also receptive to coaching. Feedback orientation can be nurtured and developed throughout one's life. Being exposed to high quality feedback and coaching can help people understand the value of feedback for performance in any domain. If you had a great coach as a youth, you are probably receptive to feedback at work or have a high feedback orientation. This is particularly true if you had a great coach in high school, as opposed to when you were younger. It appears that by the time you reach high school you have the cognitive ability and self-regulatory skills to truly learn from a great coach and internalize those lessons. We also found that the employees of supervisors with strong feedback orientations reported that their supervisor displays effective coaching behaviors, develops a strong coaching relationship, and facilitates a favorable environment for feedback use.

Effective Coaching Behaviors

Great coaches encourage growth, enhance empowerment, give high quality feedback, hold others accountable to act on the feedback, seek feedback themselves, and develop trusting relationships. Our study found that through extensive high quality interactions with expert coaches, protégés learn effective coaching strategies and the importance of a good coach for skill development. Moreover, because protégés become so well versed in self-regulatory skills (i.e., monitoring goals and gaps in goal achievement, and deriving internal feedback), experienced protégés are likely to apply these skills in other environments and transfer these skills to situations where they become the coach. More simply, if you have high quality experience being coached as a youth, you are likely to be open to feedback and engage in effective coaching behaviors when you are in the workplace as an adult.

The Quality of the Coaching Relationship

Two common extracurricular relationships include the athlete-coach and music teacher-student. These overlap substantially with the role of a manager as a coach. A high

“If you had a great coach as a youth, you are probably receptive to feedback at work.”

quality coaching relationship requires that both parties are receptive to feedback, goal setting and monitoring progress toward goals, self-awareness, motivation, self-reflection, insight, trust, respect, and commitment, in addition to elements of personal and professional growth. We found that managers with experience being coached build a constructive coaching relationship with their direct reports, likely due to their significant experience with competent coaches and teachers as role models during key developmental periods.

The Feedback Environment

A great coach nurtures an environment in which performance feedback is viewed as information. The information is non-evaluative but needed for development in the coached domain. A track coach might say, “Your start off the blocks is slow. Here are some tips to improve. Let's practice.” The protégé learns that feedback is needed to get better. Our research shows these lessons learned are not forgotten. To help develop a serious athlete or musician, for example, the expert coach must give frequent feedback, be approachable and available on a regular basis, and take the protégé's developmental stage into consideration when giving positive and negative feedback. Again, a supervisor's high quality coaching experience and his or her development within such a context transfers to fostering a favorable feedback environment in the workplace as well.

Most fundamentally, when people receive high quality coaching in high school they understand the value of feedback. They do not view feedback as punishment; rather, they are receptive to high quality feedback provided with good intentions. In other words, these people have a favorable feedback orientation. And people who are receptive to feedback for themselves often provide better feedback and are better coaches to others (engage in effective coaching behaviors, understand how to develop a coaching relationship with another, and promote a favorable environment for feedback at work).

For Organizations

We hope that managers will coach their subordinates, but that hope is often not explicitly stated, encouraged, or rewarded. Coaching at this level involves ongoing, guided feedback and a supportive climate of personal and professional growth. While not an essential element of leadership (as many excellent leaders do not have high quality experience being coached as a youth), this study suggests that individuals who do have such experience are likely to fit well in leadership roles involving coaching. If an organization wishes to further develop their leaders into better coaches in the workplace, skills, such as coaching behaviors, establishing a high quality coaching relationship, and promoting a favorable feedback environment, can be enhanced through training.

These findings also have implications for selection. An applicant's high quality coaching experiences, especially those in high school, are likely indicative of favorable coaching skills in the workplace. If this question is incorporated into an interview, it could highlight an applicant's strength—and thus a key interest to organizations—that might otherwise go unnoticed.

For the Individual

With the exception of those volunteering for Little League teams, coaching does not often surface in our day-to-day adult lives. So why do we stop "being coached" after high school or college? Regardless of whether or not you have experience being coached, you can increase your personal and professional development opportunities in terms of feedback and coaching through the following avenues:

1. Seek feedback. Listen carefully to what the person is telling you, and then evaluate its usefulness and whether or not you will follow it after the conversation is over. Keep an open mind.
2. Connect with others. Building relationships, whether they are specific to coaching or not, fosters trust and confidence in ourselves and in others. Knowing your coworker, subordinate, or manager on a personal level paves the way to a positive coaching relationship.
3. Consciously model your best coach. Or, if you do not have experience being coached, model your best supervisor. Translate their most effective behaviors to your current workplace.

In sum, organizations promoting learning environments should look for individuals with high quality coaching experiences in high school and invest in training to develop these skills in promising leaders who do not have experience being coached. If you are an individual with experience being coached as a youth, we encourage you to consciously draw on the lessons you

learned from that coach, seek feedback, and develop opportunities to coach others.

As rugby coach Larry Gelwix said, "I want you to be forever strong on the field, so that you will be forever strong off the field." These coaches purposefully taught you lessons that apply to a vast array of contexts, and according to our study, your coach also demonstrated how to teach these lessons to others.



Leah Wolfeld, M.S., is in her third year as a Ph.D. student in I/O psychology at the Florida Institute of Technology. She works with the Center for Organizational Effectiveness and the Institute for Cross-Cultural Management at Florida Tech. If you would like to learn more about the study presented, please contact her via email at lwolfeld2011@my.fit.edu.



Lisa Steelman, Ph.D. is the Director of the Center for Organizational Effectiveness at Florida Tech and an Associate Professor of Industrial/Organizational Psychology at Florida Tech. Lisa does research and consulting in the areas of feedback, coaching, performance management and employee engagement.



Jim Gallo, M.S., SPHR is the associate director for the Center for Organizational Effectiveness and a PhD student in Industrial and Organizational Psychology at Florida Institute of Technology.

**PROFESSIONAL
SCREENING SERVICES**
Protect Your Assets Contact Us Today! Toll Free: 1-800-578-5415

TIRED OF WAITING...
DAYS OR EVEN WEEKS FOR A **BACKGROUND CHECK?**
WE PROVIDE SAME DAY TURNAROUND ON MOST SERVICES.

- Criminal Background Checks
- Motor Vehicle Checks
- Education Verifications
- Employment Verifications
- Social Security Number Search
- Credit Checks and More...

- 'Live' Customer Service
- No Automated Phone

- No Monthly Fees
- No Membership Dues

Professional Screening Services
(407) 423-8766
www.ProfessionalScreening.com