

Coaching High-Level Creative Performance From Your Team

Mark McGuinness, HOW Design Live, June 23rd 2012

1. The challenge facing design leaders

If you're responsible for leading a team of talented and experienced designers, you know you can't direct them every step of the way. There's no point hiring creative people and not allowing them creative freedom.

But as the team leader, you're also responsible for getting them to deliver results that meet business objectives. So you can't afford to give them free rein.

You can resolve this dilemma by **acting as a coach for your team**. By coaching your team members you can not only raise their creative performance, but also help them learn on the job — increasing both their engagement and fulfillment at work.

2. Balancing focus and freedom

Business requires **focus**, but creativity demands **freedom**. Coaching helps you balance focus and freedom by only controlling certain critical elements, and granting coachees freedom within carefully defined limits.

Here are three key areas where you can focus coachees' efforts using coaching skills:

i. Goal setting - by agreeing a specific goal for each project (or stage of a project) and clear criteria for success, you focus the coachee's efforts in a precise direction.

ii. Asking questions - even when asking 'open' questions to facilitate creative thinking, you are directing the coachee's attention in a particular direction. For example:

“How many columns do you think we can comfortably accommodate on the home page?”

This focuses the designer’s mind on the structural layout of the page (number of columns) and creating a harmonious (‘comfortable’) result. It will get much more focused creativity than asking

“How do you think the home page should look?”

iii. Giving feedback - this raises coachees’ awareness of their performance relative to your criteria, and helps them take corrective action.

These same three areas also allow the coachee significant creative freedom:

i. Process - once you’ve agreed the goal (the ‘what?’) you can allow a designer to take her own route to achieving it (the ‘how?’).

ii. Answers - by asking questions instead of giving instructions, you create a space for the coachee to reflect and come up with his own answers.

iii. Revision - once you have given feedback, it’s up to the coachee to make good use of this in revising and refining the work.

This table shows how focus and freedom dovetail nicely in coaching.

Focus	Freedom
Goals (what)	Process (how)
Questions	Answers
Feedback	Revision

2. Goal setting

Coaching is a **goal-focused** discipline. It begins with agreeing a goal - for a meeting, project, or stage of a project.

Each goal needs to be both **specific** in terms of the business deliverables, and **meaningful** to the coachee - if you are to harness his creativity and enthusiasm to the max.

One very powerful form of goal setting is the **Miracle Question**, (which comes from Solution-Focused Brief Therapy, developed by psychotherapist Steve de Shazer and his colleagues). Here's a version of it:

“Supposing this problem had been solved and you had achieved your goal - what would success look like?”

It's only human nature to get bogged down in analysis of problems, which is sometimes helpful but can become a hindrance. **The Miracle Question invites people to stop thinking about problems and to start thinking about goals and how to achieve them.**

Here's a version of the Miracle Question that could be applied to a design goal:

“Supposing we built the perfect product. What would it empower the user to do? How would it look? How long would it take to ship? What would it cost?”

You can also use the Miracle Question to refocus a team's energy when it has got stuck in conflict:

“Supposing the team got back on track, so that everyone was working together enthusiastically and effectively. What would each of us be doing differently? How would we all feel? What would we achieve?”

Of course, we're not suggesting that miracles will start to happen and problems will magically vanish. But focusing on solutions instead of problems can do two powerful things: firstly, unlock creative ideas about what might be possible; and secondly, motivate everyone with a positive vision.

3. Creative questions

Asking powerful questions is at the heart of the coaching approach to leadership.

When you ask a question instead of telling someone what to do, you do three important things at once:

- **Focus attention** on a specific area.
- **Stimulate creativity** by prompting the coachee to think for themselves.
- **Delegate responsibility** by ‘putting them on the spot’ instead of spoon-feeding instructions.

You also get the opportunity to hear the coachee’s thinking in action, and deal with any false assumptions or half-baked ideas before they are put into action!

Here are some useful coaching questions:

“What are you trying to achieve?”

“How will you know you’ve succeeded?”

“What’s the first step?”

“What obstacles are you likely to encounter?”

“What must you avoid at all costs? Why?”

“What are your options?”

“Which option do you think will work best? Why?”

Note that these are all **‘open’ questions** - they require more than a “Yes/no” answer.

And **beware of ‘leading’ questions** - instructions in disguise! For example:

“Don’t you think it would be better to do X?”

4. Constructive feedback

Giving feedback is a way of closing the loop on goal-setting (“did you achieve what you set out to do?”) and facilitating development (“what did you learn from the process?”).

The handout for my session on **Giving and Receiving Feedback on Creative Work** will give you plenty of tips on this application of feedback. So here I’ll add some advice on giving feedback on behaviour.

Giving ‘negative feedback’ is often a delicate process, but the following principles will make it easier and more effective for everyone concerned:

i. Make sure you’ve already given plenty of positive feedback

If you have a track record of giving open, honest praise to someone, it makes it far easier than if you only jump in to criticise when things go wrong.

ii. Appreciate (or at least acknowledge) the PERSON - deliver feedback on specific BEHAVIOUR

You don’t need to rebuild someone’s personality to help them learn and change, merely ask them do something different.

Don’t say: *“You’re being difficult.”*

Do say: *“You’re a great guy, but when you do that, you’re not doing yourself any favours. You’d get a lot more respect if you started doing it this way...”*

iii. Focus on the FUTURE more than the PAST

Sometimes it’s helpful to analyse the past and what went wrong, but beware of getting stuck in accusations and defensiveness.

Don’t say: *“I think we need to get to the bottom of why you were so belligerent in last week’s meeting.”*

Do say: *“Okay, none of us want a repeat of last week’s meeting. What do you think needs to happen for us to have a really productive meeting next time?”*

iv. Avoid blame, make REQUESTS

Faced with blame, all we can do is defend ourselves. Faced with a request, we have the option of accepting, rejecting or negotiating.

Don’t say: *“Why can’t you admit it was your fault?”*

Do say: *“Next time, I want you to come to the meeting prepared to talk about solutions. Instead of ‘yes but’, I want to hear you saying ‘here’s my idea’.”*

4. Further reading

Ebooks (free downloads)

[*Creative Management for Creative Teams*](#) - an introduction to coaching skills for leaders of creative teams.

[*How to Motivate Creative People \(Including Yourself\)*](#) - a practical guide to using the four most powerful types of motivation to get outstanding creative performance out of your team.

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