



FREE-RANGE COACHING: DEVELOPING AUTONOMY

by Julie Savage Fournier

Have you, as a Lean professional, manager or Kata coach, been in this situation where people cling on to you and can't do anything unless you guide them? Have projects failed the minute you turned your attention elsewhere? Can teams execute the action plan if you're not watching? It happened to me, and it is not a validation of expertise, nor skill—lesson well learned! Making oneself indispensable is a symptom of weakness. For some this weakness might be a lack of trust, a controlling tendency, the inability to delegate, or a failure to teach and coach. This weakness's consequence is becoming quickly overwhelmed.

Even when using a coaching approach, someone might fall into the various traps that renders the coaching ineffective and get in the way of developing autonomy. Examples of these pitfalls are overcorrecting, giving the answers too easily, confusing the coachee with unclear expectations... Don't worry, we can adopt intentional practices to get out of it and become better coaches.

What's the deal with coaching?

It seems everybody and their dog call themselves coaches nowadays... Is this a temporary hype? No, it is more of a deep trend. The advances in neuroscience and

education support coaching as a great approach for knowledge transfer and skills development.

While adopting an expert's posture and controlling the knowledge might provide status and be pleasing for the ego, it induces multiple consequences:

- It slows down Lean deployment, sometimes bring it to a halt entirely because Lean projects seem too complicated to even bother.
- It creates a Lean clique instead of a Lean culture.
- It breeds helplessness because only the expert has the answers, so there's nothing we can do without them.

On the other side, adopting a coaching posture and deploying the knowledge within the organization comes with a few benefits:

- It creates a Lean culture and develops everyone's ability to contribute to the improvement efforts.
- It creates empowerment so people can work on projects of a scope that suits their ability.
- It builds confidence over time as the scope of the projects evolves.

My favourite benefit, however, I experienced when I was managing a team of 30 employees: it reduced my workload and my mental load. People didn't have to get my approval for every little detail, they didn't ask

for my help all the time. They knew what to do and how to do it. They could solve problems by themselves. What a relief! And the only person who had to change something was me...

OK, I want to coach now, what else?

Coaching is not an overnight solution, more like an investment in another person that pays off over time. Yes, that means developing people and long-term thinking, these concepts are quite familiar by now in the continuous improvement world.

My favourite way to track the progression in my coaching is to use autonomy as my expected outcome. This means at some point, I expect the coachee to perform alone... And ideally to become a coach as well at some point. The reason is simple, as a single coach, I am a bottleneck... And I will have to move on to developing someone else at some point. By developing confident improvers, we might find a few with the potential to become coaches themselves. With more coaches, the impact becomes exponential as the capacity for developing people increases.

Autonomy is one of the keys to cope with labour shortage. We can't waste management resources in micromanaging as it used to be when there were more willing workers than jobs to fill.

The Surprising Power of Autonomy

There is a well-ingrained belief that people get motivated by gains: you achieve more, you get more (money, points, rewards).

This is only true for mechanical work and simple tasks. This kind of reward system is detrimental to motivation and engagement when people perform complex or cognitive tasks. If you want them to think, you need to use something else as a motivator(1).

Here is what works for these complex or cognitive tasks:

- *Purpose*: contributing to something bigger, belonging to a group, giving meaning to the task.
- *Mastery*: feeling there is progress in the skills, pride of workmanship.
- *Autonomy*: using self-direction and making judgment calls, having some freedom to make decisions.

In the 21st century workplace, a lot of the mechanical tasks have been automated, those remaining are getting there as well. Work is becoming more intellectual, as even the manual jobs now require at least some amount of planning and problem-solving skills.

How to teach and measure autonomy?

Imagine a child learning to walk.

At first, the baby gets carried everywhere, there is absolutely no autonomy. They don't carry their own weight, they have no choice where to go, they are helpless if nobody is there to carry them. This is the stage of "doing for them" and the skill is "non-existent."

Then, we hold them when they try to walk. We carry a bit of their weight; we keep their balance as they start getting used to standing

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upright. With the repetition, the muscles will develop, and they will take a few steps. They don't have much choice in where to go but they're trying. This is the stage of "teaching" and they are "learning" the skill.

At some point, the toddler can take a few wobbly steps alone, and we hold their hand. We don't carry their weight anymore, but we support their balance. They are in control of where they go unless we hold them back, so they don't run off in the street, we keep them safe. This is the stage where they become "competent" with the skill of walking, and they need "supervision, support and protection" while they hone their new skill. Supervision, support, and protection, that's the job of a coach.

We can't hold their hand forever, though. The child will walk alone, explore the world, decide where they go, carry their own weight, and keep their balance on their own. This is the stage where they are "confident", and we must "let go".

This metaphor is fitting, because for the skill to develop and progress, we must adapt our own response so they can get to the next stage.

Doing for them => no skills and no autonomy

Teaching => learning of skills and not much autonomy

Coaching => competent with the skills and supervised autonomy

Letting go => confident with the skills and full autonomy

However, changing our mode of response without warning can create a lot of confusion and distress. For that, I suggest telling the coachee they have moved to another stage of their learning so we should move to another stage of support to follow. It has the double benefit of rewarding their achievement and reducing the distress by providing a clear cue (2).

What's interesting with walking is even when we are confident in our skills and a competent walker, holding someone's hand to walk come back again many times later in life. When get through a difficult spot on a track, after an injury, when we need comfort or just to communicate to someone we stand by their side. It also happens when wearing unpractically high heels for fancy events, to perform a spectacular twirl while dancing.

Every time we have a struggle or an extra challenge, it's nice to have someone's hand available. This is why letting go is not abandoning someone, we can leave our hand close for when there's a need like we can provide a bit of flash coaching to help a graduate coachee.

Moving from competent to confident.

Encouragement and celebration are great coaching levers to develop and reinforce skills. We can use the three elements of motivation to provide positive reinforcement while coaching for a new skill.

Mastery

Celebrating mastery is done by making the progress clear and obvious to the coachee as they might not know yet how to evaluate their own progress. Some things to look for in our observations so we can point them out to the coachee: a job well done, progression in a skill, unlocking a new skill. We don't want to miss any important opportunity to make the coachee aware of the progression, as their perception of progress is what keeps them engaged and motivated. When they progress without realizing, they can't develop their confidence and that's how we get people who need external validation for everything they do. Another common reaction to a perception of stagnation is helplessness, people stop trying when they don't see results. It's important to close an achievement before setting the next goal so the brain can register the progress.

Purpose

Injecting purpose into the tasks and skills to develop is done by giving meaning to the work. We can learn about the coachee's values to link their skills to something important to them. We can foster belonging with shared experiences. We can reframe intentions from a transactional perspective to a more meaningful one. This is really one of the easiest levers of motivation to use as people already know what is important to them, we only need to ask about how the skill they are learning is contributing. When they don't have an answer, we simply must lead them towards a broader perspective. Continuous improvement is about making the world a better place, quite a nice start for a purpose, right? Then we need to connect the dots of why they chose this specific context, industry, or project instead of the million other options available.

Autonomy

Developing autonomy is done by pushing them gently towards doing things by themselves. For that we can at first point out their options and leave them the choice, later we can ask them to identify their options and decide. We can discuss their ability and test their comfort level, ask them to stretch a bit further to see if it works while keeping it safe to fail. And most importantly, the trust of their coach in their capacity can do wonders in their motivation to try on their own. Remember, you can't hold someone's hand forever! And it is detrimental to their development if you do, no matter how much

you enjoy helping.

How do we know when it's time to let go?

Imagine a parent getting a few steps away from their toddler and encouraging them to walk to them. That's a way to test if the child can walk a few steps alone and to set a small scope for the next victory. After the celebration, the parent can increase the distance over time to continue building the toddler's capacity.

That's what we sometimes forget in coaching, we need to set small goals, test the targeted ability while encouraging the coachee, celebrate victory, and move on to something more difficult. Saying "You are getting good at this, I will let you try alone this time" or "Nice job, let's make it a bit more difficult next time" is both a challenge and a reward. Remember: mastery—being aware of progression—and autonomy—getting to do it alone—are both strong motivators. And by increasing the difficulty and the scope, the confidence builds progressively.

To know if I should let go, here are two of the skills I test in my coachees:

I stop offering help and wait for them to recognize their need and ask for it.

I stop the direct praise and ask questions instead to know if they can self-evaluate their work.

In conclusion, with a few changes in the way we lead, teach and coach, we get develop people towards full autonomy, delegate with trust to confident skilled people, and multiply

our impact. Sometimes it's hard to let go, accept we are not indispensable or not have all the answers. However, this change of mindset and behaviour is extremely rewarding; there is so much pride when the people we have coached become excellent coaches themselves.

And don't get sad because confident and competent people still need a hand once in a while, they won't disappear forever... The relationship of trust we create when we coach while respecting someone's autonomy is a strong bond. ■

References

- (1) About motivation and engagement, read Dan Pink's "Drive"
- (2) About the cues and rewards to create new habits, read BJ Fogg's "Tiny Habits" or James Clear's "Atomic Habits". Clear also has a chapter about sustaining a behavior long term by making it progressively more difficult to prevent boredom.