



The Manager's Guide to Coaching and Delivering Feedback to Interns

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Introduction

The internship experience provides students with the opportunity to get grounded in the “real world” while, hopefully, adding value to the organization or person sponsoring the internship itself. In this regard, sponsors can play a significant role in shaping the interns’ personal and professional development. A key ingredient in providing this learning opportunity is the sponsor’s willingness and ability to deliver quality coaching and feedback to the student interns. We recognize that finding time to coach and deliver feedback is an issue in most organizations; and since interns will generally leave the organization in a relatively short period of time, coaching and feedback are often more of a challenge to do, and do well. However, since most companies also want to benefit from the internship experience, we would argue that the business case for providing coaching and feedback to interns is quite compelling.

While the principles of coaching and delivering feedback to college interns are based on the same principles that would be used in other organizational settings, it is important to understand that college interns are not the same as other employees. The interns are typically students who may or may not end up working in their internship organization or even in the same field as their internship after they complete their education. Because many of these students are relatively young and inexperienced with the world of work, the host organizations and the people who supervise and work with these students have the opportunity to provide a meaningful and developmental experience for the students. In fact, the early boss-employee (i.e. boss-intern) experiences often have the most impact in shaping how students will see future work experiences, including the students’ attitudes about work and even their eventual leadership approach.

Approaches to Coaching

Our own research and the research of others shows that coaching is one of the lowest rated competencies for managers—it just doesn’t happen as often as it should. In this section, we will discuss a few approaches to coaching, including our recommendation of one coaching strategy that can help maximize the internship experience for the intern, supervisor, and company.

There are many organizational approaches and models of coaching. One commonly used approach is the “sports coach” model where coaches impart their specific knowledge to the coachee so the coachee can then start doing things “right.” In sports, this approach is used frequently in teaching new or enhanced skills (i.e., how to kick a ball with more power). This model also may bring forth images of a well-known basketball coach noted for his fiery temper who yells at his young charges in front of the masses.

Another frequently used coaching method is the parental model where, once again, the “coach” is often found delivering a list of “do’s and don’ts,” much like how loving parents might tell their three-year-old about the importance of safety while crossing a busy street. In both of the above approaches, the coaches deliver their instructions in a one-way format, with no input from the coachee (intern). The intent is often well-meaning, but the impact on the student

learner is frequently viewed as negative. Below, we discuss a developmental model to coaching that we strongly recommend when dealing with college interns.

The Weintraub-Hunt Model for Coaching College Interns: A Developmental Approach

In the work that we have done on effective coaching in organizations, we presented a developmental approach to coaching that effective managers have used successfully to develop employees and to create coaching-friendly organizations (see *The Coaching Manager: Developing Top Talent in Business* by James Hunt and Joseph Weintraub, Sage Publications, 2002, and *The Coaching Organization: A Strategy for Developing Leaders*, also written by James Hunt and Joseph Weintraub Sage Publications, 2007). The modification of our original “Coaching Manager” model is presented here as The Weintraub-Hunt Model for Coaching College Interns, which integrates our approach to organizational coaching with the current research efforts of Richard Bottner (2007) who examined college internship experiences.

The Weintraub-Hunt Model for Coaching College Interns (see chart below) offers an opportunity for companies and the people who manage college internship programs and interns to increase the growth and learning of the interns within their respective organizations. The utility of our developmental approach has been demonstrated consistently in our organizational work and through our research, with over 7,500 students and coaches at Babson College in Wellesley, Massachusetts studied since 1997 in the Babson College Coaching for Leadership and Teamwork Program (www.babson.edu/coach). The developmental approach used in our model is learner focused – coaching is targeted at what the learner hopes to learn. The approach is oriented toward learning and change rather than on compliance (i.e., do it or else). The model also helps the intern/learner to capitalize on existing strengths as much or more than on overcoming weaknesses.

Selecting “Coachable” Interns

No coaching program can be successful unless the students who are selected for internships have been carefully screened and chosen. Part of this selection process should also screen for the “coachability” of the interns – do they have a desire to learn and to be coached? Southwest Airlines is one example of a good organization that selects people at all levels who possess both the “attitude and ability” to do the job. With interns, it is important for them to realize that they will be coached and be active participants in what we would hope will be a positive learning experience.

Defining Successful Performance

If you have the right talent, the intern’s supervisor needs to define what success would look like for the intern and the organization. Defining success can be done by clearly outlining roles and responsibilities and/or describing the results that would constitute success both during the internship, as well as at the internship’s conclusion.

This step is often missed, leaving the intern and the organization confused and disappointed. It becomes very difficult to provide appropriate coaching if there isn't a clear set of expectations about the criteria for success. Not understanding the culture is one of the major reasons people at all levels fail in organizations – so, be sure to spend the upfront time to define the job, as well as how things get done in your company's corporate culture.

One simple strategy to define success is to create what we call the company "success manual" which describes the three most important reasons we want this intern, and spells out the ways to succeed (and fail!) in this internship. The time you spend in the beginning is indeed time well spent.

Creating a Coaching-Friendly Context

Interns can often feel lost or set apart if they are not properly introduced to people within the organization. Letting interns know that they don't have to have all the answers and that it is okay to ask questions if they don't know something are key concepts in creating an environment where the intern can feel that it is okay to ask for help.

Assuming a "Helpful" Mindset

One of the ways to maximize success and to provide a solid learning experience for the intern is to have the supervisors and others who work with college interns look for ways to be helpful and to have conversations with them, when appropriate, about the internship experience.

Stopping the Action: Creating Coaching Moments

At different intervals, perhaps one a week or once every two weeks, it is important to check in with the interns to see how things are going. These scheduled check-ins give the boss/coach relationship an important structure and sends a powerful message about the value of the interns and their importance to the organization's learning. There are also unscheduled coaching moments that occur when something has happened where the reflection about the experience would add great value to the internship experience.

The Coaching Dialogue: Asking Good Questions

Of all the strategies for working with interns, sitting down with the intern and asking questions about them is essential if development of the intern is a goal of the internship experience. Our coaching model has, at its core, the use of effective questioning as a fundamental process. We strongly recommend that interns receive frequent coaching and that coaches are doing more questioning than they are lecturing. For example, after a project was completed, you might ask questions such as "How did that go?" "What was it like?" "How did it feel?" "What were you trying to accomplish?" "What did you learn?" and "How do you plan to use the knowledge gained from this internship?"

Observing Effectively

In order to do a good job coaching an intern, it is essential that you see them at work and/or have access to good observational data from others. Otherwise, the coaching and feedback processes are more limited in their ability to effect change. Be clear on the difference between behavioral observation where you have specific examples of what somebody did versus hearsay or inference of what you think may be going on.

Providing Balanced Feedback

Student interns are in a learning mode. They are not necessarily, at this stage of their development, polished and knowledgeable about the job or the organization. So, be sure to balance the need to deliver good feedback with the understanding that we want to help them to become better. This is where the marriage between coaching and feedback makes a difference. Blending a developmental coaching orientation along with good feedback often works best when dealing with interns.

Creating a Developmental Plan with the Coachee/Intern

Most interns don't get a lot of time to interact with their internship managers. But to get the most out of the internship experience, we recommend that part of the coaching process include the creation of a developmental plan during the internship itself that focuses on defining goals for the internship itself, as well as for the personal/professional goals of the intern. This conversation is one of the best ones that interns will have and sends a strong message that the organization cares about its interns, both during and after their internship experience. This conversation lasts from 30-60 minutes but returns huge dividends to the intern and the organization.

Follow-up

In spite of good intentions to develop interns, the use of follow-up strategies to check in on the organization's goals, as well as on the intern's developmental plan, is highly recommended. The follow-up should happen as part of the internship assignment itself and/or after they have completed their internship assignment to see how they are doing after life as an intern. This latter approach takes time and is certainly more challenging, but it sends a powerful message that the organization cares about them and their personal development. The informal network of student interns then spreads the word about how good the organization is where they had their internship.

Providing Feedback to College Interns

Good coaching typically involves the use of feedback. But one distinction is critical to remember: feedback by itself is not necessarily coaching. Telling an intern that he blew it in delivering a presentation at the weekly staff meeting is feedback, but certainly not developmental coaching. In this section, we will discuss the components needed to deliver the

type of feedback that is clear, developmental in nature and where the possibility of personal change can be achieved.

Coaching and delivering feedback to college interns is a key part of the internship experience. After all, an internship is generally selected by students to provide an experience that they could not ordinarily receive in a traditional classroom. We recognize that finding time to deliver feedback is an issue in most organizations; and since interns will generally leave the organization in a relatively short period of time, feedback is often more of a challenge to do and do well. Since most companies also want to benefit from the internship experience, we would argue that the business case for feedback and coaching is quite compelling. According to most research on learning, feedback offered without the support of coaching may not be all that helpful to the student intern. Feedback should be delivered to the intern in a “helpful” way and, perhaps most importantly, feedback must be delivered by a coaching manager who is aware of (a) the powerful emotional impact that can accompany feedback, and (b) how the intern's reactions can shape his or her ability to learn from feedback.

The Benefits of Feedback

The benefits of feedback, especially when combined with appropriate levels of coaching, can be enormous for both organizations and interns alike.

As such, developing skill in effectively providing feedback to employees should be considered an important goal for all managers of interns. Research on the benefits of employee feedback (London, 1997) can also, in most instances, be applied to student interns:

- Feedback helps to keep goal-directed behavior on course. Keeping interns informed about progress as they attempt to change or pursue any goal helps them see how far they have come and how far they have to go.
- Feedback helps interns set appropriate goals for themselves and the internship itself. On the basis of the feedback that interns receive, they see what they have accomplished. Those who are motivated will want to push further.
- Positive feedback, when appropriate, can help interns feel that they have achieved something even when their achievement doesn't lead to a tangible result (such as project completion). Unavoidably, some projects will be completed after the intern has returned to school.
- Motivation theory and research also show that feedback can serve to enhance motivation since interns will understand what it takes to be successful. They will know the rules of the road. The intern who can say, “Now I know how to get there” is more likely to make the attempt.
- Feedback can help interns develop a greater ability to detect errors on their own. When coupled with self-assessment, feedback helps us better judge our own actions because our ability to observe ourselves has been calibrated by comparison with the feedback of others.

- Related to the last point, feedback can also help interns see what they need to learn. They have a clearer sense of their own weaknesses or learning gaps. Their ability to take charge of their own development is enhanced.
- People who are accustomed to getting feedback tend to seek it out. The effective provisioning of feedback by a manager is one of the most important tactics for creating a coaching-friendly context, and should be the goal of every intern's director.

The Basics of Providing Balanced Feedback

In describing the basic components of feedback, we will also report on what the coaching managers we have studied have told us works and doesn't work. We'll also try to fit the various components more directly to the model of coaching described in our book *The Coaching Manager: Developing Top Talent in Business*. In this section, we'll also rely heavily on work by Buron and McDonald-Mann (1999).

Before giving feedback, we make the assumption that you and the intern have discussed what he or she is working on and that you have given the intern an opportunity to reflect on his or her own performance. We also assume that you were clear on what aspects of the intern's performance you were trying to observe and what was important in the situation. Finally, we assume that you have had a chance to get some solid data about the performance of the intern, data that you trust.

We also assume that you have decided what your goal is in giving the feedback. In addition to learning, is your goal to help appraise or celebrate the intern's previous actions? Or is your goal to encourage the intern or provide helpful information as he or she looks forward to the next challenge in your organization and/or in their future career? Either way, the basic structure of feedback is the same, and the suggestions for how to manage the process are similar. Having said that, the art of coaching, an art that one learns only with practice, is in knowing how to offer feedback in a way that conveys as much useful information as possible.

Feedback: The Basic Requirements

Feedback content should include the following:

- The situation in which your observations were made.
- Your observations of the intern in action.
- The impact of the intern's behavior or actions, on you and others as appropriate.

Before offering feedback, be sure to do the following:

- Set the stage for your feedback discussion in a way that will encourage the maximum degree of openness, which is essential to learning. Make sure that the location, degree of confidentiality, and timing are appropriate to the individual and the situation.

Effective feedback is:

- Focused on what the intern is trying to accomplish or has told you that he or she wants to learn.
- Given frequently.
- Given, whenever possible, right after an action along with the intern's reflection on his or her action.
- Given, whenever possible, with a helpful, not an angry, attitude
- Focused on behaviors that have a reasonable probability for change
- Specific, using behavioral terminology
- Focuses on the task, action, or behavior, not on the person.
- Is direct and usually begins with "I" statements.
- Delivered without interpretation.
- Checked by the coaching manager to make sure that the intern heard the message the manager wanted to deliver.
- Followed by the question: "What do you plan on doing with this feedback?"
- Followed by the suggestion of a follow-up meeting, particularly if the feedback to the intern has been negative.

The Coaching Manager

Feedback represents a form of communication, or a message. What should the message include? Feedback content usually includes the following: a description of the situation in which you observed the intern; a description of the behavior of, or actions taken by, the intern you observed; and finally, a description of the impact of the behavior or actions of the intern on others or on a relevant business outcome. "Here is what I saw, and here is what I think was the impact of what I saw" is the basic structure of a feedback message.

Note what is included and not included in the message. What is included is factual information, to the highest degree possible. What is not included is an interpretation. You may have to climb the ladder of inference a bit when describing what you "think" is the impact of a particular action or behavior; but oftentimes, you'll know. You'll know because you can describe the impact of the employee's behavior on you: "I don't know what others might have thought about your approach to this, but I liked it. It really addressed my concerns." If you describe the impact from your vantage point, you're making very few inferences. After all, an individual's manager is a key stakeholder in the actions of that individual. The impact on you as manager of the intern does count; and the impact you experience from the actions of an intern may be similar to the impact experienced by others. You can therefore state, "This was the impact on me;" with real authority.

On the basis of our own research and review of the writing to date on personal learning, we encourage you to always consider the importance of the intern's goals while delivering

feedback. If you focus on what the intern is trying to accomplish or has told you he or she wants to learn, you have been given license by the intern to be clear and direct.

Setting The Stage For Feedback

Setting the stage for feedback is important. In some situations, the scheduled individual setting is most appropriate. You may have been asked to go out and gather a significant amount of performance data for the intern, or the issues may be quite sensitive. Structure (a scheduled meeting) and confidentiality (away from everyone else) may help the intern focus on what is being said rather than on the reactions of others. In other instances, the stage may have been set by your working understanding with the intern. Perhaps the intern expects to meet with you in the hall, right after the big meeting. Once you and your intern are used to the give-and-take of feedback, you may find yourself providing more of it in informal settings. The point we are making with regard to setting the stage is to be sensitive to the intern's needs. When in doubt, ask. If you're not satisfied with the answer, the old rule "praise in public, criticize in private" should serve as your guide. We encourage you to always set the stage in such a way that the self-esteem of your intern will be minimally threatened.

Setting the stage also involves a consideration of timing. Feedback, particularly if it is based on substantial data collected by the coaching manager, perhaps involving others, may be eagerly sought but anxiously anticipated by the employee. Substantial feedback takes time to absorb. If you are going to engage in a major feedback intervention, make sure you and the intern have sufficient time to thoroughly discuss the issues raised by the feedback.

If feedback is being given to enhance an intern's learning and the intern is trying to build effectiveness in addressing a challenging goal, then feedback from multiple observations will be useful. Your intent should be to give the intern enough data to build a "video" of his or her performance over time.

Likewise, feedback that is given right after an action and the individual's reflection on that action is more likely to result in learning. The events are fresh in everyone's mind. Feedback that is timely is thus important as well. It may be necessary for you to take a few minutes to figure out what you want to say, but don't delay too long.

The feedback you provide should be specific and focused on the task, action, or behavior. By specific, we mean descriptive. It is important to gather data that accurately reflect the intern's performance. Feedback involves delivering that data in a way that is helpful.

For the receiver of feedback to be able to make use of the data provided by the coaching manager, the information must be presented clearly and simply. The language and style of the presentation should be appropriate to the audience. Avoid nondescriptive or technical terms unless you are sure that the receiver of the feedback can work with those terms and can understand what they mean.

The best feedback is also usually quite direct. Directness usually requires the use of “I” statements. “This is what I saw.” Some of us have experienced, and probably all of us have heard about, feedback statements that begin, “We don't think...” The reality is that unless the intern knows who you are talking about when you use the word “we,” such a feedback statement may have very little credibility. “We” statements can also make the intern feel “ganged-up on” or attacked. If the coaching manager has to provide feedback on behalf of several individuals, it is much more effective to be specific about who said what. We also feel strongly that feedback directed to interns and to all employees should always be intended to maintain or enhance the individual’s self-esteem. So, the way we deliver feedback is critical to the intern’s ability to learn and reflect.

Avoid interpretations drawn from the second, or above, levels of the ladder of inference. Such interpretations are likely to generate defensiveness – and worse yet, are likely to be wrong. Interpretation occurs during the coaching dialogue through the use of questions. Our favorite example of inference masquerading as feedback is “You have a bad attitude.” Such a statement is actually devoid of data and represents a pure interpretation. A descriptive statement that would support such an interpretation might be something like “You told the last three customers who walked in the door that you hated working here and that you can’t wait to go back to school.” Note that such a descriptive statement is in some ways even more hard-hitting than the interpretation. Data almost always carry more weight than the inappropriate use of inference.

Finally, ask the intern what he or she can or will do with the feedback. Ideally, feedback leads to additional reflection, and then action. Having delivered the feedback, or after delivering each point of the feedback, the coaching manager should stop, make sure that he or she was understood, and ask for the intern's thoughts on how the feedback can help. Remember that the coaching process begins with a coaching dialogue. It is important to keep the dialogue going by providing plenty of opportunity for the employee to reflect on the feedback you have provided. A little silence during these periods is okay. It is far better to offer some feedback, ask for the employee's reactions, and then wait, rather than hurry on to the next point. Indeed, if the feedback has any real substance to it, it is natural for the employee to need a few minutes to digest what has been said. Make sure you, the coaching manager, don't do all the talking!

After the feedback is given, the intern may move ahead with future reflection and action. If the feedback is particularly negative or problematic, however, it may be wise to schedule another meeting to follow up soon after the meeting at which the feedback was given. Even under the best of circumstances, critical feedback can be difficult for some interns to manage, so don’t try to overdo the giving of feedback. Keep your list short except in the case of delivering positive feedback where, in most cases, interns will not be as uncomfortable in receiving good news! Follow-up meetings show concern for the intern and symbolize the coaching manager's commitment to the intern’s ongoing learning.

The Lack of Feedback

We know from our consulting work in organizations that most people do not receive feedback or, if they do, they don't receive feedback that is perceived as helpful. It is critical that interns receive feedback. The old adage that "some feedback, even negative, is better than no feedback at all" is generally true. It is also true that missing or incomplete spoken feedback does not mean that the intern gets no feedback at all. Inaction on the part of the manager is also feedback. The intern will often fill in the gaps. The intern will particularly wonder, "Did I do a good job?" and/or "Does the manager think I can really handle this?" Ultimately, like it or not, the intern will be thinking about questions such as "Does she like me?" "Am I doing a good job/" "Does anyone here care about me?" and "Is this a good manager to be working for?"

The lesson here is to look for opportunities to deliver feedback to interns that is constructive and helpful; but don't feel that you have to give a daily report card – after all, the interns wanted a departure from the grading of their work at school!

"Provide constructive criticism when you do something wrong. Have the patience to teach you to do it right."

"I learned so much from my mentors and it really opened my eyes to some of the things I could expect in the field."

"An organization can greatly augment the meaningful experience of an internship by using coaching and learning techniques."

"Have a mentor guide interns through the experience. The mentor should give constructive criticism. That will make the internship worthwhile because students will learn from their mistakes."

"To make an internship meaningful, I think they should have a mentor, someone the intern can go to when they have problems."

"Provide each intern with a successful mentor who will be there to answer questions and lead them through their journey."

"Having a mentor would be key; someone who could help an individual through tasks and give advice on future career goals and how to attain them."