

Coaching Software Development Teams

Michael Feathers
Object Mentor, Inc

Agile 2006

© Michael Feathers 2006. All Rights Reserved

Topics

- Coaching and Change
- Background
 - People Model
 - Organizational Values/Personal Values
 - Personal Stances
- Anatomy of Learning Experiences
- Coaching Techniques
- Politics, Transformative Cliques, Manipulation

Coaching and Change

- *Coach* – a team advocate, a person who helps a team produce a desired effect
 - Coaches aid change and provoke change
 - Coaching has ethical responsibilities

Coaching

- All coaching relies on some model of human behavior
 - It is hard to talk about human behavior frankly without offending people
 - 'Things You Can't Say' – Paul Graham
- Pitfalls
 - Objectifying people
 - Labeling - disrespectful, barrier to communication

The Dilemma of Work

- The necessary evil? The necessary good?
 - If you didn't need the money, would you work as you do now?
 - Why? Why not? What about your coworkers?
 - Who are we at work?

Organizational and Personal Values

- In any social setting, there can be conflicts between our personal values and those of our surrounding organization
 - These conflicts determine the character of organizations and how well they function
 - They are hard to talk about

Introducing 'Pat'

- "Every class has its own personality"
- When we are together, we are something different than what we are separately
- Super-Organism theory:
 - 'A Group is it's Own Worst Enemy' – Clay Shirky
 - The Lucifer Principle – Howard Bloom
- 'Pat' does not embody organizational goals, 'Pat' is an amalgam of the team.

Organizational Stance

- Who does 'Pat' work for?
 - Core values (inferred from action)
 - Typical behaviors
 - Reasonableness of Expectations

Personal Stance

- Who we are:
 - Our personal lifecycle, our personal experience
 - Our history in the organization
 - Our level of commitment
- No judgment here

Anatomy of Learning

- Learning involves a Tension/Release Cycle
- The thing we work for, we remember
 - Self-investment
- The job of a coach is to find teachable moments, and help team members release the tension productively
- Chaos aid learning

Coaching Techniques

- | | |
|---|--------------------------|
| ▪ Conflict Identification | ▪ Name It |
| ▪ Go Sideways | ▪ The 'Flounce' |
| ▪ Go Home | ▪ Team Surgery |
| ▪ 'Antennae Up' | ▪ Push in the Water |
| ▪ Pair Coaching | ▪ Self-disintermediation |
| ▪ Ask the Room | ▪ Cheerleading |
| ▪ Make It Physical | ▪ Cultivate Respect |
| ▪ Active Listening | |
| ▪ Advance/Retreat | |
| ▪ Tending "Pat" | |
| ▪ Personal Encouragement / Discouragement | |

Conflict Identification

- As a coach, your job is to think about the team, think about its health and identify problems that may not yet be recognized
 - When you identify a problem you can:
 - Address it and fix it, or
 - Lead people to find it and fix it themselves (tension/release)

Go Sideways

- Problems are enticing and captivating, but every moment you spend captivated is a moment that is wasted if the solution is down another path.
 - When problems don't yield to pressure, help people switch gears. Show them a similar or smaller problem.
 - Often this helps the original problem yield.

Go Home

Well, not really, but..

- Pay attention to progress on problems and cultivate a sense of when people or problems are overloaded.

'Antennae Up'

- When you are a coach you have to develop a sensitivity to what is actually happening.
 - Who is working with whom?
 - What work is being avoided?

Pair Coaching

- Have someone else who knows the team available to throw ideas off of.
 - In consulting this works very well
 - Internal coaches can use peers on other teams or trusted members of the team

Ask the Room

- When the team adopts a new rule, ask them to call a huddle when tempted to break it, to see if there are alternatives
 - Leverages the whole team and builds a sense of how the teams works

Make It Physical

- A key technique you can use as a coach is to take the abstract and make it tangible
 - Information Radiators
 - Design

Active Listening

- Listening is the single most powerful thing you can do as a coach.
- It is hard
- Listening with minimal judgment is harder
 - Balancing judgment ('Pat' vs. Person)
 - Pitfalls
- When you listen and it isn't recognized, you identify resistance
- *Listening is deep respect*

Advance/Retreat

- Work with someone initially on some task, but selectively withdraw support
- A way of gauging engagement and aiding initiative
- By letting them take the lead, you are helping them develop initiative in other situations

Tending 'Pat'

- Imagining what Pat is like right now. It is a visualization. Is s/he tired? Scared, relaxed? What is the feel of the room?
- What is Pat afraid of?
 - Losing job?
 - Extra work?
 - Is Pat nervous?

Personal Encouragement / Discouragement

- Most coaching work is one on one.
- You can't address 'Pat' directly
- As a coach, you have to be able to address things that no one wants to address
 - Active Listening and Respect are your tools
 - Know the person
 - Know the feeling
 - Feel it first
 - Address

Name It

- Often the first step in solving a problem is naming it
- If it is an 'Elephant in the Living Room' this is doubly-so
- Name problems and coach others to name them

'The Flounce'

- Identifying the 'Elephant in the Living Room'
- Obeys "tension/release".
 - Pointed questions, soliciting comments.. ending with silence. Then stark honest assessment of the problem, usually with emotional gravitas.

Team Surgery

- The most effective way to change 'Pat' is surgery
- Team surgery is hard: politics, fiefdoms
 - Internal sub-teaming
- The surgery that changes 'Pat' the most is 'add person'
 - Removing people doesn't force as many differences in relation

Push in the Water

- As a coach, you have to be able to ask people to go beyond their limits

Self-Disintermediation

- "I think Sara knows about that, check with her."
- Can work well with a tension/release cycle.
 - "If only we spoke to Sarah first"
- Be aware of your desire to be in all loops
- When the work gets done without drama and you didn't do any coaching, that's success.

Cheerleading

- Doesn't have to be very overt
- Part of being a coach is identifying what has gone well
- There are successes on all teams in all situations. Tie back to goals.
- Before 'cheerleading' decide whether it is appropriate

Cultivate Respect

- People on teams will objectify each other
- They will attempt to develop intimacy by complaining about others on the team
- Your reaction is *important*.

Ethical Questions in Coaching

- When is 'Pat' asking for too much?
- Manipulation
 - Does every intervention have to be "above board"?

Team Health

- Intimacy and Unguarded Moments
- No Emotional Steady-State
- Goal Achievement Record
- The Role of Rules
 - Zero tolerance for zero tolerance

Dealing with Resistance

- Advance/Retreat
- Ignore

Dealing with Personality Conflicts

- Levels of relatedness:
 1. could hang out and talk about things outside work,
 2. can work with for a couple of hours a day.
 3. No, get me away from this guy/gal.
- What is the relationship like from the other point of view?
- Does everyone else have the same problem with that person?
- Remedies:
 - Team Surgery
 - Align on communication boundaries
 - Let them go
- Hiring is the most important decision an organization ever makes

Politics and Cliques

- 'Us versus Them' is natural, get used to it.
- Doesn't have to be pathological
 - can be galvanizing
 - can be dissolved

Discussion

Resources

- **Fearless Change** – Mary Lynn Manns, Linda Rising
- **Organizational Patterns of Agile Software Development** – James O. Coplien, Neil B. Harrison
- **Teamwork is an Individual Skill** – Christopher J. Avery
- Dale Emery (blogs)
- Esther Derby (blogs)
- W.R. Bion - Experiences in Groups