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The Leader as Coach: How to Coach a Winning Team (2nd ed.) (Book Review)

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The Leader as Coach: How to Coach a Winning Team (2nd ed.), Book review by Dorrie Taylor Sullivan.

This book is true to its title and explores how and why successful leaders coach rather than simply manage. The writing is direct, and content flows logically through chapters describing the new importance of leadership, what a coach really does, coaching your winning team, relational intelligence, feedback as the key to coaching, and a coaching scorecard. The book is a quick 1- to 2-hour read, making it perfect for airline trips or an afternoon perusal.

In describing the new importance of leadership, Dr. Huseman uses the concept of corporate loyalty as a springboard for characterizing relationships at work within a grid of caring and competence. Most importantly, the author highlights the impact of first-line managers on employee performance and satisfaction. More than ever before, the manager's approach to leading through coaching may be the best way to enhance work performance and culture. However, Huseman is quick to say that coaches "get you from where you are to where you want to be" (p. 19), noting that this isn't the same as a manager moving an employee to where the manager wants him or her to be! The author identifies individuals' self-awareness and ownership as keys to successful outcomes and describes several specific strategies for coaching employees.

Huseman bases many of the examples in the book on a real-life sports coach from his childhood. He paints a compelling picture of a coach who demonstrated excellent application of coaching strategies including selection of team members, creating a winning culture, practicing what is preached, and making sure that teams know their scores (i.e., performance metrics are widely shared and easily understood to help judge outcomes).

A particularly helpful section of the book deals with differing strategies for coaching high performers, solid performers, and low performers. Clear descriptions of the three groups of performers and the recommended strategies for each provide approaches that are immediately applicable. Huseman provides an excellent overview of feedback and the importance of timing and specificity, and, again, specific tools are recommended.

The author's description of relational intelligence is interesting--he asserts that coaches must manage long-term relationships to be successful. Simply stated, former interactions affect current interactions and relationships, which in turn will influence future interactions. Thus, consideration not just of the present moment but of the past and future is critical. The last section on coaching your boss is worth reading, although the author acknowledges that the boss must be open to being coached.

Some readers may find the repeated use of sports analogies objectionable; however, the examples are well matched to the important ideas. The book deals almost exclusively with individuals as part of a team and would benefit from additional content about coaching teams. Many of the assumptions and assertions in the book are supported by significant bodies of evidence, so it is unfortunate that there are no references to substantiate them or to provide readers with information to seek out further details on key topics.

Managers who take the time to read Leader as Coach will come away with a reframed concept of their leadership role and some very specific coaching tools and techniques to enhance their practice. Leader as Coach has been used in many organizations to build common cultures around management philosophies, and it works well for this purpose. Dr. Huseman makes a true contribution with this focused and practical book.

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Reviewed by Dori Taylor Sullivan

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