

Fostering Excellence:

Behind Every Great Employee is a Great Coach

Need an assist with your coaching techniques? The EXCEL Model™ focuses company leaders on the needs of the team and the organization—a winning combination!

BY SAM PHILLIPS

Time and experience has taught us that effective coaches in the workplace are not those who tell employees what to do and punish them when the desired results are not fully attained or don't see the results they expected to at the end of a project. Modern managers realize that teaching is guiding, enlightening, suggesting and leading with a positive flare. Thankfully, the “drop and give me twenty” mentality is shrinking and is being replaced by a more positive approach. According to Vince Granieri, FSA, a new concept—servant leadership—has emerged.

“Simply stated, it means that it is leadership’s responsibility, in part, to ensure the success of their associates,” says Granieri. “Good leaders truly empower their people and help them bring their thoughts to the forefront. Some employees are independent and need less guidance, while others are sometimes reluctant to bring their thoughts to the table. In the end, everyone should have a voice and the freedom to express themselves.”

Enter the EXCEL Model, a teaching and coaching tool developed nearly 10 years ago by The Flippen Group, College Station, Texas, and adopted by many organizations in the educational arena. This highly interactive model is now being introduced in the general business arena, and is a straightforward, effective leadership mechanism used to improve relationships and performance both in individual situations and in group settings. The basic premise of the model is that once you have earned the confidence and trust of your employees, your ideas will be more readily accepted and more effectively implemented into the organization’s structure. The model works well because it gives

people in leadership tools they can use to build meaningful relationships with the members of their groups and provide them a safe environment



to grow and develop a dialogue for team building, which leads to higher performance levels.

“If leaders provide good working environments and build good relationships and rapport with the members of their groups, employees are able to use their skills confidently and enthusiastically,” notes Granieri. “In other words, effective use of the EXCEL Model will create a dynamic learning environment that will lead to high-performing groups and high-performing organizations.”

It is the role of the manager to help employees reach the pinnacle of their success. Company leaders who have incorporated this learning tool into their workplace environments agree that EXCEL is a good fit because it focuses the leader on the needs of his or her team and defines the leader’s success by the success of the team members.

According to Granieri, there are five components of the EXCEL Model:

- Engage—building relationships
- X-plore—getting in touch
- Communicate—dynamic dialogue
- Empower—developing skills
- Launch—momentum and direction

Engage is the ability to successfully initiate communication with others, contends Granieri. “It’s a positive way to start the day involving affirmation of all members on your team,” he says. “Instead of jumping right into business, it’s good to renew relationships, to let people know they are valued members of your team, to confirm that you do have knowledge about their lives outside of work.

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Something simple like, ‘What happened with your son on his little league team last night?’ ‘How did your daughter do in the big swim meet?’ ‘Thanks again for all the effort on the Brewster account—we received a lot of positive feedback about your ideas,’ goes a long way. Not only does this draw your team into a strong relationship, it sets an example of the

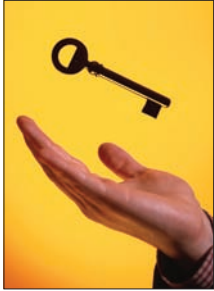
kind of positive behavior they should use with customers, associates and each other.”

“If Engage is the foundation of the work day, **X-plore** is the foundation of the day’s work,” says Granieri. “To successfully X-plore, one must listen well, show concern and ask open-ended questions. Granieri contends that creating a safe and non-threatening environment is key here. “People have to feel free to share their progress as well as their concerns,” he says. “This stage is all about listening, asking questions and being empathetic. This is the place where people should feel comfortable providing feedback and receive affirmation that you, their leader, are on their side.”

The work really begins in the **Communication** step. “Let’s say you’re trying to set the group’s goals for a particular timeframe, the third quarter for example,” says Granieri. “An effective way to start the session would be to ask everyone for a status of where they are with regard to meeting their current goals. This is also the time to ask if there are any adjustments to be made to the existing schedule or if any team member is having difficulty getting done what they’ve committed to do for the current time period.”

In establishing a dialogue in the **Communication** step, the leader must facilitate the discussion, but also establish a learning environment as well. It’s his or her responsibility to talk about goals being met, ask if anyone needs help or simply re-emphasize what needs to get done. It is the leader’s responsibility to actively manage the process while being responsive and convincing. This is not monologue time; this is where everyone participates in an even exchange of ideas, input, challenges, successes, etc. and re-sets goals and/or re-prioritizes resources, if necessary, to achieve the final result.

In the **Empower** phase, the leader provides team members with what they need in terms of ability and skills to perform the tasks they identified in the X-plore stage. “At this step, goals have been prioritized; who is going to do what has been established; and resources are in place,” says Granieri. “Team members are truly empowered when they have the **ability** and the **accountability** to perform their current responsibilities.”



What Makes a Good Leader a Good Coach?

Business gurus will contend that there are certain personality traits every good leader must possess to help create an atmosphere where people can perform well and enjoy the work they do.

Granieri says that one of the most important characteristics of a good leader is commitment—to the welfare of the team, the overall goals of the organization and the success of the company. “If the leader believes in the people around him and is determined to make good things happen, that dedication is infectious and spills over onto those around him,” he says.

Being engaged and genuinely interested in the people who work with you and for you is also paramount. “People need to feel like someone cares,” says Granieri. “Not just about work-related issues, but in their personal lives too. An effective leader will take the time to get to know her people, pay attention to what’s going on in their lives and spread a little fun in the workplace. He or she must truly be interested, not just surface interested. This will create a trusting and healthy work environment—one that people enjoy coming to every day.”

Leaders should be disciplined, but not rigid, contends Granieri. “If you possess the attitude, ‘My way or the highway,’ you’re doomed to fail from the start. People will be hesitant to voice their opinions. A lot of good ideas never see the light of day in this type of environment. Nothing can grow. Early on in my managerial career, if someone asked me, ‘Are you fair to your people?’ I would have responded that yes, I was fair. I treated them all the same. Now, I would answer, ‘Yes, I am fair; I treat them all differently, based on their needs.’”

To successfully perpetuate an organization’s success, the coaching and development of associates is vital. People make the difference, and if they’re well trained, happy and in an environment that is enriching, they’ll take the company to great heights.

“This is particularly important in our type of business,” Granieri says. “We’re not building widgets and steel girders—things you can touch. We’re selling promises and we’re selling intangibles. So it’s very important that folks keep developing, stay fresh. A good coach will make sure that happens. What it really boils down to is, the more creative, the more disciplined, the more able an organization becomes, the more productive they’ll be and through that productivity they’ll reach higher and higher performance levels.”

Granieri stresses that eliminating the constraints—both personally and from an organizational perspective—is mandatory. “Openness to new and different ideas is necessary if you want to be successful,” he says. “There are no bad ideas. Everyone can make a positive contribution. The trick is creating an atmosphere where that open exchange is possible.”

If we remember one thing, Granieri contends, it should be that we are just people and sometimes we think we’re communicating or we have a tendency to believe everybody knows what we know and what they know, when in fact they only know what they know. It’s up to us to communicate what we know.

“Because relationships are built on trust, it’s important for every coach, every leader, every employee to foster an atmosphere of trust and security, where communication is on-going, a way of life, easy,” he says. “This atmosphere is motivating and exhilarating. People will feel inspired and respected and part of a winning team!” ■

This is where the rubber meets the road, so to speak. Everyone knows the ground rules, the goals and what's at stake. All team members know what's expected of them. It's in this stage that the judgment of the manager is put to the test. Has he or she been a good coach? Teacher?

Launch involves force and momentum. The best leaders passionately motivate the team to meet and exceed their objectives at this point. "Everything is poised for movement," Granieri says. "If the leader has done his or her job, everyone is confident and ready to get the job done."

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The leader summarizes the relevant ideas and events and gets commitment from the team members to use the skills or information they learned to meet the needs identified in prior stages."

Granieri adds that implementation of the EXCEL Model is successful if a number of important variables are in place. Managers have to believe in it and create an atmosphere of acceptance. Though not necessary, it's helpful if all the management of the company is following the same plan—it's good for continuity and morale.

"The Excel Model works great in any environment where people are receptive to change," says Granieri. "It's very versatile. What's needed is the commitment of the leadership. So is an agreement throughout the group that each person is accountable for his/her own actions and decisions."

What's important to keep in mind when implementing the EXCEL Model is that relationships take a long time to build. In addition, it can take awhile to develop the needed trust among the team.

"When you start slowly, you can finish fast because in the end, people not only learn the drill, but when they see you modeling it, then they model it for others. Folks are really good about understanding who's committed and who's not."

When all is said and done, does use of the Excel Model positively impact the way people interact?

"Absolutely," says Granieri. "It improves the quality of relationships. It allows people to be more open with one another. It builds confidence and trust in team members. It fosters communication, mutual respect and understanding. If the whole organization buys into it, then you get a lot more consistency with regards to processes and outcomes. As a converted "Command and Control" manager, I truly understand the awesome power that building relationships brings to the leadership process." ■

Vince Granieri, FSA, is president with Integrated Advantage Consultants, Inc. in Cincinnati, Ohio. He implemented the Excel Model™ at a large life and annuity writer and led one of three major initiatives to eliminate corporate constraints. In addition, he is working with The Flippen Group to bring their leadership models to the life insurance industry. He can be reached at Vince@integratedadvantage.com.

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