

JOB COACHING AND ACCOUNTABILITY: LESSONS FOR TRUSTY

By Judy Hissong, CLM
President, Nesso Strategies

Ever notice how playing the blame game hits all of us? First, your receptionist, Trusty, shows up late, but it's not his fault. The traffic was terrible. Then you learn the coffee is gone and the big firm deposition is starting in an hour. You talk with your assistant, Dusty, who is in charge of supplies, but it's not her fault, no one told her they used the last bag.

In our [last article](#) we talked through a dress code concern with Rusty, our wonderful legal secretary who had occasion to dress inappropriately. For a quick recap:

As an administrator you strive to be liked and respected. You work hard to be perceived as fair, and as nice. And likely you are. That's fantastic. The difficulty is that a majority of the time we stop there. We are loved by all, feared by some, and abused by anyone who can get away with it! Do you know this feeling? Are you ready to develop a culture of accountability? The easiest way to do that is employing job coaching. It's time to shed any embracing of blame, and pass responsibility to the firm back into the lap of the employee.

When you hire a new employee you explain the nuts and bolts of the position they are interviewing and/or accepting. You offer the very tangible description of the duties and the reporting lines, and now you also begin explaining that accepting this position is accepting a responsibility to the organization, to the firm in which you are being hired. You, as the manager of the business, and as such are holding the accountability around this responsibility. Your employees are not responsible to you; they are responsible to the firm itself. You create the necessary balance for your employees between their job responsibilities and their duty to the firm.

A critical piece of the accountability conversation begins with you holding yourself accountable to the standard. In the case of Rusty, we're talking about dress code. Are you adhering to the policy at all times? Despite senior partner infractions that are outside your control, despite associates who might hold themselves as "golden children", you must hold yourself to the standard you are enforcing with your staff. Without this small piece, you have no opportunity to affect change through coaching accountability.

Now let's go back to the day that has started with your tardy receptionist and your lack of coffee in your supply cabinet. You sit back down at your desk and already your morning is making your smile become a frown. You ask yourself, 'How does this keep happening?' This discussion leads you to wonder if you have the right people in the right places, and the number of times you've experienced problems with both the supplies being out and the receptionist desk empty until 20 or 30 minutes after the office opens.

STOP.

What if the problem is a little closer to home? Whoa. What if you are caught in the position of being nice to everyone, and holding no one accountable? Let me explain.

Let's go back to the tardy receptionist for a good example of this in action. Trusty has been late before, and almost always has the same story - traffic did it to him. You listen each and every time, and offer the same understanding and advice - please get here on time, don't let it happen again, or whatever your mantra is for this sort of behavior. You see, Trusty is otherwise a good employee, and can be counted on for any variety of odd-jobs that arise during the workday. You don't want to lose him, but you are at your wits end with this late issue.

It's time to employ some job coaching, and put accountability in place so that Trusty completely knows the consequences to tardiness in the future. You begin the next tardy conversation with an open-ended question, "what is necessary for you to be to work on time?" and you listen to the answer. Really listen. You don't form another question until he is done with his answer. And, if he's not answering, but merely spinning a tall tale, interrupt and ask the same question again.

Once you have an answer, build it in to your next question. "I understand you have difficulty rising in the morning, and the firm trusts you to open the doors and be the voice on the phone when the day begins. What can be done to re-create the responsibility you have to the firm SO THAT everyone knows you will be that voice on the phone when the business day begins?" Two things in this question: First, and foremost, you establish the responsibility is to the firm. Trusty reports to you, that means it's your job to hold him accountable to his position. And, Trusty is responsible to the firm for his daily duties. Second, and this one is important, you have built a "so that" into your question. "So that" creates a tie between the behavior you are seeking to modify and the successful outcome that results. It also connects the job performance requirement with the reason for it. And, in very simple language, it creates a direct link between performance and pay. Performance of the job Trusty was hired to do and the pay he receives as a result. And, pay can be compliments, salary, benefits, or not having to be in your office every day because he's tardy!

Now Trusty gets to answer again. You continue creating questions and listening for answers until you have some statement that will provide built-in accountability. Your closing comment may sound like this: So we are in agreement that beginning tomorrow you will get up 30 minutes earlier so that you will be here on or before your assigned start time? Trusty replies with a yes. You continue, "And, in the instance you are unable to meet your job responsibility of timeliness, you will receive a written warning so that it is clear to everyone where the accountability for this action resides. Are we in agreement?"

In coaching conversations the ideal question is open ended and not biased. A terrific way to start any conversation is with the word "what". It's open-ended and doesn't prejudice the answer ahead. If you begin with "Why are you always late?" you get a barrage of excuses and defensive behavior which doesn't address any of the real issue, and you'll be asking again in a few days. A reframe of the question, "What is the obstacle to your timely arrival?" or "What has to change for you to be on time for work?" has a different sound to it, without really aiming at a different answer.

In a performance coaching situation, as this example personifies, you have already identified the outcome before you started on the discussion. You have a specific result you wish to achieve, and you want to create open ended questions which will help the employee co-create the solution. Coaching applies in many other situations. Like the partner meeting when the owners are stuck for ideas on solving a particular problem. Put your "what" cap on, and toss out an open ended question that strikes you curious. Then sit back and let them talk. Again, you'll likely be surprised at the outcome!

Coaching isn't a new profession, but it is growing at a rapid rate! There are over 14,000 coaches that belong to the International Coaching Federation and are Accredited and licensed. Using coaching skills is a fantastic way to distinguish yourself from others, and also a wonderful skill to build connection in your

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organization, in your home, and in your volunteer communities. Asking the open-ended question will give you tremendous insight into whomever you ask, and its fun too! Let me know how it works for you.

For more information and further reading on Accountability, visit our [online library](#).



JUDY HISSONG, CLM

President, Nesso Strategies | Founder, Legal Leadership Institute

Judy understands teams. And she knows how to help you maximize the potential of yours. For over two decades, Judy has applied her vast knowledge of team dynamics, emotional intelligence, work/life balance, leadership, finance, and legal management to help law firms improve their people, process, performance and, ultimately, profits.

Bachelor's Degrees in Accounting and Physical Education | Master's Degree in Sports Management | Former Professional Athlete | Licensed Provider of Emotional Intelligence Tools | Certified Living Your Vision Facilitator | ALA Certified Legal Manager | ACE Certified Personal Trainer | ICF Professional Certified Coach

CONNECT WITH JUDY

619.546.7885 | judy@nessostrategies.com | nessostrategies.com | legalleadershipinstitute.com



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