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Adopting a coaching culture empowers employees, strengthens employers



Sleeman Breweries, Canadian Blood Services see benefits of new programs
By Nance MacLeod and Denis Lévesque

Awhile back, Sleeman Breweries sales team lead Ross Danbrook recalled going on a sales call with a new employee.

The worker made a generic introduction about the company to a potential client, instead of specifically stating the name of Sleeman and what sets it apart from other beer providers.

But rather than chastise the new hire, Danbrook leveraged coaching methods to ask what he could have done better to land the sale and separate himself from the competition.

“The biggest thing I’ve learned is to get people to understand ‘What if I did it this way?’ instead of ‘How does my company want me to act in this situation?’” he says.

Danbrook is one of 180 people managers at Sleeman who has gone through a coaching program as part of a new initiative the brewery rolled out in 2016.

The move was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines and professional standards of the International Coach Federation (ICF).

In this and many other ways, the ensuing coaching culture that has developed has empowered employees and strengthened the company overall.

Sleeman's coaching program arose from an internal survey that found employees at all levels wanted more feedback and coaching from their managers.

To meet this need, the company partnered with an ICF-credentialed executive coach based in Toronto.

"As a leader who is often busy, you want to tell your team what to do when they come to you with a problem," says Martin Durocher, vice-president of HR at Sleeman Brewery in Kitchener, Ont.

"There was a great deal of recognition of how powerful coaching could be. It takes longer than telling someone what to do, but it's well worth it."

"The program began at the very top with the executive team being the first participants and the first leaders to role model a coaching style of management."

The program is fully aligned with the ICF's definition and principles of coaching — partnering with an employee in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires her to maximize her personal and professional potential.

In this model, the coach enables the employee, who is seen as an expert in her own field, to be successful through self-realization.

Establishing a coaching culture from the top-down can have a trickle-down effect that positively impacts revenue along with employee retention and engagement.

Whether it's a CEO trying to lead a company through a transition, or an employee hoping to improve communication skills, coaching is a way for someone to broaden his capabilities through self-discovery, rather than being told what to do.

Nearly 90 per cent of respondents to a 2017 survey who had been coached said they were satisfied with the experience, according to study commissioned by ICF and conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers.

Further, they cited increased self-esteem, enhanced communication skills and increased productivity as the three most frequent outcomes of coaching — all important elements of building a collaborative and effective team.

"Unlike a training session, where everyone gets the same content, coaching is highly individualized and tailored to the person's needs to help participants set meaningful goals and make changes in a way that is effective and sustainable," says Julia Rabinovitch, an ICF-credentialed coach in Ottawa.

"Leaders who participate in coaching tend to become better listeners, ask better questions and apply a coaching mindset in working with their teams, which strengthens relationships and improves their leadership effectiveness."

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Rabinovitch manages the coaching practice at Canadian Blood Services, which adopted its coaching culture as a way to better equip leaders to support their teams, achieve results and contribute to optimizing employee experience.

The decision to make coaching optional for leadership development was intentional, she says. The “pull” approach has allowed the practice to steadily grow in participation and popularity while sustaining momentum over the years.

Canadian Blood Services continues to evolve its eight-year-old coaching practice, which now includes a diverse team of internal coaches and a robust external coaching network.

Offered in conjunction with a 360-degree feedback assessment, the program makes coaching more scalable and accessible to a wider audience.

As a result, many leaders and employees have now shifted their perception of coaching from remedial to positive as a way to support continued growth and development.

“Having someone in my corner to help me define my personal and professional aspirations was so helpful,” says Lise Simpson, director of corporate affairs at Canadian Blood Services in Ottawa.

“My coach empowered me to understand my own habits and what was getting in the way of my success.”

Simpson’s coaching engagement lasted six months, including weekly interval check-ins via Skype and phone conversations.

“I found that I was stepping up more often at work,” she says. “It’s surprising to see yourself starting to do the things you had in the back of your mind but were never confident to do them because you didn’t have the chance to work them through first with someone else.”

Keith Colwell, another senior leader at Canadian Blood Services who manages organizational payroll, finance and HR services, noticed a ripple effect through the organization as a result of its adopted coaching culture, which inspired him to become credentialed as a coach and part of the organization’s internal coaching team.

“Coaching can help unleash the potential in employees,” he says.

“You’re basically able to leverage as an organization the full assets that the employee brings to the table, utilize their abilities and keep them engaged with their work. The coaching helps them see and utilize their full value.”

Canadian Blood Services continues to evaluate the effectiveness of its coaching practice and look for ways to innovate and improve. So far, the results are encouraging, with 99 per cent of participants saying they have been satisfied with the coaching experience, and 80 per cent saying the coaching helped them achieve their development and leadership goals.

Sleeman Breweries also saw similar results as a result of its coaching program. Leaders are now able to listen

more effectively and ask more powerful questions, instead of relying on advice and instructions.

“There will be times when leaders have to be direct,” says Durocher.

“Coaching isn’t the only tool we can use, but it’s an effective and powerful tool that can help engage employees, empower them, build their self-confidence, and lets everyone have more meaningful discussions.”

As for the new hire Danbrook took under his wing, he says the self-actualization realized by the recent university graduate has helped contribute to a “night-and-day” mentality.

“He realized the importance of social skills and developing relationships in this industry and ran with it.”

Both ICF-certified coaches, Nance MacLeod works at Career Compass Canada in Toronto and Denis Lévesque works at Solutions Opti-Gestion in Ottawa.

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