

Walking toward better coaching and feedback

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Companies are increasingly using human capital management technology to enable ongoing performance coaching and feedback. But they often discover technology only gets you so far. We do have great mobile technology to encourage and facilitate continuous performance management. But implementing that technology and assuming managers and employees will start having effective feedback conversation is like buying a Fitbit and assuming you will automatically start walking 10,000 feet every day. A lot must happen outside of the technology for it to work. Which brings me to the point of this article: the best way to improve coaching conversations could involve literally walking away from your coaching technology.

An interesting [article](#) recently published by the American Psychological Association reviewed a range of empirical data suggesting that feedback conversations may be more productive if participants walk alongside each other. Here is a quick summary of evidence suggesting that the best coaching is delivered on foot.

Cultural Psychology. One track of psychology focuses on uncovering universal “truths” about human behavior by studying characteristics that are common across human cultures and languages. The rationale is any trait or concept that is universal across human societies is likely to reflect psychological traits that are fundamental to humans as a species. It turns out that most cultures use walking metaphors to convey a sense of problem solving and resolution. For example,

“When one surmounts conflict, one is said to *move on* or *move forward*. Alternatively, conflicting parties might reach an *impasse* or *standstill*, leading to exasperations that *this is going nowhere*. Consider also what it means to *stand one’s ground* versus *meet halfway*, to *get past* versus *become stuck* in the current conflict”.

These sorts of phrases are found in most cultures. This suggests that walking together may truly be an effective method for encouraging positive discussion and conflict resolution.

Physiological Psychology. Psychologists have studied how walking and other forms of physical exercise impact our mood and stress levels. To quote the authors, “there is substantial support that physical activity increases positive affect and lowers stress (see [Biddle, Fox, & Boutcher, 2002](#) for a review), and this may be especially true for rhythmic, mild to moderate intensity activities like walking ([Ekkekakis, Hall, VanLanduyt, & Petruzzello, 2000](#)).” If we assume that feedback discussions tend to have better outcomes when the participants are in a good mood and are not stressed, then we can also assume that walking during feedback sessions should increase their chance of success.

Motivational Psychology. There is evidence that suggests motivation to achieve outcomes may temporarily increase when we are moving. Physical activity can spur energy for accomplishment. As the authors put it,

“it appears that locomotion can positively influence the motivation to resolve conflict. (see [Higgins, 2012](#), for a review)...because people move forward to obtain desired objects in the environment, there is a very literal connection between bodily cues of forward motion and desired end-states. Metaphoric language reflects this powerful association—having successes is often described as moving toward one’s goals (“advancing”); in opposition, failures are often described as backward movement (“setbacks”). [Landau, Oyserman, Keefer, and Smith \(2014\)](#)”

I suspect some of these effects on motivation are probably quite small and very short lived. But when it comes to encouraging employees to address potential weaknesses, any method that could increase their motivation to change is worth trying out.

Creative Psychology. Most of us have had the experience of going on a walk to help think through complex issues. And studies have shown that walking is often associated with more creative and divergent thinking. This suggests that walking could be particularly valuable when holding coaching conversations focused on addressing challenges where there are not clearly defined solutions.

Conflict Resolution. One of the outcomes of going for a walk is a change in scenery. Aside from enjoying the view, moving to a new physical location can help people talk through difficult issues. As the authors note, “a novel environment can allow disputants some degree of freedom to try out new perspectives, behaviors, or ways of working out a problem”. Unfortunately, most conflict discussions with close social partners take place while seated. This could actually serve as a hindrance to effective conflict resolution discussions.” In sum, the worst place to have a difficult coaching conversation with your employee or manager could be sitting down at your regular desk or meeting table and staring directly at them. Yet that is probably the most common scenario for coaching conversations.

I sometimes say that continuous performance management technology is like a “Fitbit for coaching”. It reminds you to engage in coaching conversations, provides structure for meetings, keeps track of previous conversations, and transfers data from the discussions so it can be used by other talent applications. It appears there may be one more part to that analogy. Continuous performance management technology also reminds us that every so often we should get up and take a walk.

To be clear, I’m not suggesting one must walk to have an effective feedback conversation. Nor do I think the effects of walking will totally transform the quality of feedback sessions. But if you have the option to take a walk during your coaching sessions, why not give it a try. It might lead to better outcomes and if nothing else it will make both of you a bit healthier.