

Every Conversation a Coaching Conversation

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I have been very fortunate the past 18 months to have a contract with Citigroup in New York, to be among the 20 or so coaches for the company's Executive Development Program for its top 100 leaders. Citigroup is now the largest banking and investment company on the planet, with over 300,000 employees across 30-plus countries around the world. So far my coaching clients have been in Citigroup's Mexican affiliate, Banamex, which is in itself a large company employing over 30,000 people and is the oldest bank in Mexico.

So recently I was working in Mexico City with my current round of coaching clients – these are executives who supervise and influence thousands of employees across Mexico. A couple of them might be future candidates for CEO of Banamex. Small thinkers these folks are not, and my challenge is to help them to be better at what they do and to prepare them for the even larger roles they will likely play in a vibrant and growing worldwide banking system.

Those of you who know Mexico City know that it is a traffic nightmare. My office/home happens to be across town from Banamex's new HQ on the far western side of the City. Every coaching visit implies about a 90 min. investment in time just to get there, not to mention another 20-30 min. to get past bank security on arrival. You can thus imagine my near-panic when I went outside my front door to climb into my brand new rental car, only to be advised by the watchman that my left front tire was -- flat. Of course, I was in banker's suit-and-tie, and exactly 150 minutes away from beginning my appointment. So I turned to the watchman and asked if he could help me change the tire. He answered that he would be glad to, but he had never changed a tire before in his life. [Small cultural mention – somewhat like New Yorkers, many Mexico City residents don't own automobiles. In this case, given far different income levels than those in the Big Apple, a lot more *chilangos* (Mexico City denizens) have never driven, much less owned a car.]

So my job was to direct and help my watchman to conduct the following operations. (These are simple enough for those of us who have grown up changing tires. But take your time for a moment and think each step through for someone who has never experienced this maneuver.):

- Extract the tire from the trunk. (It's under the pad.) Unscrew the plastic holding device for the tire, pull the tire out. The jack tools are under the tire. (Consisting of the scissors-type jack and the tool that both raises the jack and loosens the tire lugs.) [I'm lucky the car is brand-new, remember, and all implements are complete as installed at the factory.]
- Place the jack under the frame. (Oops, you have to screw it closed with the tool so it'll fit.) Put the large metal plate on the floor as a base, the small plate goes under the frame of the car. (How do you say frame in Spanish? O, yes....*carrocería*.)
- Use the tool to unscrew the lug nuts. (He does know that they go counter-clockwise; this guy is no dummy....) Pull the tire off and put the new one on. (O yes, after a number of attempts, I remember that the car has to be jacked up higher in order to accommodate a tire that's full of air.)
- Well, now after tightening the lug nuts again, we're ready to go. (I do remember you have to lower the car a bit to the pavement in order to tighten the lugs on a front wheel.)

Somewhere during the above procedure, the thought hit me. "This is a coaching conversation: I have to help this coachee understand the jack workings and procedures, cheer him on while he's learning, and reward him when the job is completed." And this coaching job is just as important as the one I'm going to in Banamex, 'cause if I don't do it right, I won't get there. (Of course, I could have changed the tire myself, but at the cost of a pair of very dirty hands and a sweaty shirt – and more time to get cleaned back up to my banker's best. There's a metaphor in there somewhere about delegating tasks to others...!)

So on the way to the Banamex office, I had 90 min. to reflect on this experience and to think through the words I would be writing now. I began to think about the many conversations I've had with others, including my children. Every conversation, I began to realize, can be a coaching conversation. When we're talking with our employees/colleagues, even informally, what we say communicates values, humor, respect -- and strikes a tone about the way we conduct business. When we're talking with customers, we're communicating lots about how we feel about them, how much we want their business, how able we are to address their concerns (not serve our own bureaucracy!) When we're chatting with our children, they sense our caring, our interest, our respect for them. And when, for example, we're talking to a server in a restaurant, our children present, it's an example to them of how to motivate others who are helping you. It's all a coaching conversation!

On the airplane back to San Antonio, I sat next to a young woman who wanted to talk, needed to talk, with someone -- she was going to meet her boyfriend who had just had open-heart surgery. The time passed quickly for both of us, and as we left the airplane she said, "Thank you for the conversation; it sure helped me get here in better shape." That was a coaching conversation, too.

(And come to think of it, this note is also a "coaching conversation" isn't it?)

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