

If You Can't See What's Missing, You Get Stuck With It

By Charles E. Smith Ph.D.

“Coachability” is the willingness to be coached, to listen, to respect instruction and act on it. Coaching (another set of eyes) lets you see what’s missing which, if you act on it, could make a big difference.

These days, many people know that coaching is a good idea. They listen to it politely but never do anything differently. Such pretending to listen is seductive. Last night I sat with an engineer for almost three hours. He had suffered for years with his boss’s unwillingness to listen to him. He shared his insights, hopes, fears, sense of hopelessness and wishes for a career full of accomplishment and supportive relationships. I helped him analyze the situation, explore strategies and behaviors, get in touch with his own responsibility for the lack of communication, and actions that would move the situation forward. Finally, I asked him if he would act on any of what was discussed and he said, “No, I’m not ready.”

It’s said that you can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink. It’s like that with coaching. To be uncoachable means that you won’t really listen and follow instructions, or are afraid to try. You may think you already know, or hear advice as domination; you may simply feel hopeless. Maybe you don’t want to be vulnerable, or you simply accept your current performance even when you know it is weak.

Before W. Edwards Deming died, the Quality expert who helped Japan transform its manufacturing practices and capture huge segments of the global auto and technology markets, I had attended a conference he led. He told us that in the West we traced problems to there being something wrong with the people doing the job. Our solutions typically were to move or change people, or to restructure.

In contrast, he said the Japanese leaders considered their quality and production problems a matter of training and that their job was to discover or invent the training that would result in resolution and progress.

Every team that wins championships is well-coached. An uncoached team flirts with extinction. Welcome to the world as we know it. Instead of a symphony (the sound of high human purpose, elegance, and flawlessly coordinated action), we have a cacophony of egos without shared meaning, creating disorder by degrees, all the while falsely expecting order.

Imagine how the LA Lakers would do if many of the players were uncoachable. Imagine how Congress or your boss might do if they were properly coached.

I could list all the places I know that are less effective than they could be if they were coached, but I won't. Make your own list. We home schooled our boys for several years and a major success was that they became coachable learners, not afraid of the future nor of being wrong.

However, the people I know are usually uncoachable in the places they are most stuck. I've come to think that most of the world's problems come from lack of proper training – in how to get along, how to cooperate, how to create performance aspirations beyond normal and how to become responsible for an entire business and not just someone's small part of it. These are all training problems and most people are untrained.

To be coachable is a choice. Anybody can do it. It's simple, but not easy. You just have to give up your ego for a while.

Imagine a coachable company, a coachable family, a coachable marriage, a coachable political system, a coachable world...