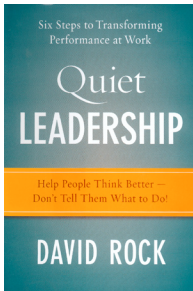


Book Reviews for Managers

Quiet Leadership

Six Steps to Transforming Performance at Work

by David Rock



HarperCollins Publishers,
2006
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"His techniques are anchored in current research in neuroscience."

REVIEWED BY IAN COOK

Managers are default programmed to solve problems. That's what they are paid to do. That's what they are good at. And that is how they see themselves, at a subconscious level. So, when an employee comes with a problem, the manager's knee-jerk reaction kicks in (pun intended)—right into solution mode. The employee walks out with *the manager's* solution and the manager feels great.

To quote the author,

"We make the unconscious assumption that the other person's brain works the same as ours. So we input their problem into our brain, see the connections our brain would make to solve this problem and spit out the solution that would work for us."

This is a huge obstacle to developing accountable, non-dependent employees.

David Rock presents a suite of approaches for getting the other person, be it employee, family member or friend, to work their problem and, at the same time, gain insight into their *thinking* process that may not be serving them well. His techniques are anchored in current research in neuroscience, for example:

- Our performance depends upon our *behavior* which is guided by our emotions which are triggered when our *thoughts* (beliefs, habits, memories, assumptions, etc.) interact with certain situations in our daily life.
- We all have developed neural pathways—circuits, wiring—which connect a vast array of information into subconscious patterns (Rock calls them "maps") that direct our habitual responses to most situations. Over the years these pathways become deeply entrenched.

- It is much easier to develop new pathways in our neural circuitry than to try to eliminate or alter existing ones.
- The instant we get a new idea or see a new possibility or a solution to a problem, we experience a rush of energy. For at least a brief time, we are highly motivated to do something related to it. If we don't promptly act, write down or talk about actions we will take, our enthusiasm rapidly fades.
- Positive acknowledgement and feedback from others has a powerful effect on the development of new pathways, or, put it another way, successfully changed behavior.

Two core messages stand out for me from the book. In our coaching role, we need to:

1. Focus on *their thinking process*, rather than their problem, itself.
2. Help them apply their own neural connections to the problem and come up with a solution that works for them. When this occurs, they become energized.

What are these approaches David Rock offers us? He calls them his *Six Steps to Transforming Performance at Work*. Here they are, with brief comments on a few. Keep in mind that this is a book you need to pick up, read in detail, and then try out a few techniques in real coaching situations. He provides a number of sentences that you can use, verbatim, at each step.

Step 1: Think About Thinking

You purposely avoid the actual problem, listening instead for their assumptions and how they are framing the problem. Direct the conversation away from the problem and toward potential solutions. This seems counter-intuitive but, as the author points

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out, focusing on problems is appropriate when you are working on system or production processes. Analyzing a person’s problem, however, takes you into blame, excuses, guilt and their existing neural hard wiring.

Step 2: Listen for Potential

Rock shares an insight for coaches: listen as if the individual has all the tools and ingredients to solve his or her problem but would benefit from exploring his/her thinking out loud. This helps us maintain what he calls “clarity of distance.” Otherwise we risk becoming too closely entangled in:

- the details of the problem
- our own filters around what is right and possible
- our own agenda (e.g. our need for them to solve their problem)
- our own hot buttons, emotional triggers that stop us from being an objective support

Step 3: Speak with Intent

When you do offer insight, comments or suggestions, deliver them in short bites, specific points, and in terms that they will understand. Why? An employee who is emotionally vexed by a problem and perhaps out of his or her comfort zone is less able to absorb rational ideas and solutions. He/she needs you to communicate very clearly and simply.

Step 4: Dance of Insight

The sequence of four techniques Rock offers here is the heart of his methodology. The goal is to take the individual from stuck thinking around a problem to new insights and concrete action.

1. Ask *permission* when you, as the coach, want to move the conversation to a deeper, possibly more unsettling level for the individual. For example, “You said you were a bit testy in your reply to the committee. Can I ask you a bit more about what prompted your reaction?”
2. *Placement*: Define (i.e. pre-warn) what you want the conversation to be about and the context of the comments you will be making. Again, an example, “Bill, I want to clarify what the initial expectations were of both you and the committee members and then look at some alternative ways you could have handled their questions.”

3. Ask *questions* to get them thinking and to probe their thinking, vs. learning the details. One question might be, “How strongly would you like to clear this issue up with the committee?”
4. Finally, *clarify*, based on your impressions, what they seem actually to be saying, what they are trying to say, the feelings behind their words, and so forth. More than just mirroring back what you heard them say, you summarize your intuitive impression, such as, “It sounds like you are really ready to sit down with them and have a dialogue.”

Step 5: The “CREATE” Model

This tracks a sequence where you lead them to explore the *current reality* (CR) of both their thinking and the situation at-hand, then *explore alternative* (EA) solutions or courses of action and finally *tap their energy* (TE) that hopefully arises from one of the ideas they have surfaced.

Step 6: Follow Up

Concludes with a fairly standard array of things to check up on when monitoring your employee’s progress on his/her plan of action.

Whether you turn a problem back over to your employee to work out-with your coaching-or shift the “heavy lifting” over to him/her to resolve a gap in job performance-again with your coaching-you will probably be taking him/her outside their comfort zone. In that uncomfortable place we humans tend to experience fear, confusion, unfamiliarity, and self-doubt, not to mention other primal feelings like anger.

The techniques of a “Quiet Leader” can help us lead our employees through discomfort and back to comfort and, in the process, grow them to a higher level of self-understanding and confidence. I think they merit a place in every manager’s “coaching toolkit.”

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