



# BLOWING THE WHISTLE ON THE BOSS: COACHING, NOT REFEREEING, YOUR EMPLOYEES

BY JIM CONCELMAN

**M**ore than half of U.S. employees said their boss is a referee instead of a coach, according to a recent survey by Development Dimensions International (DDI), a global human resource consulting firm. While a “coach” proactively helps employees before they are in a position to make a mistake, a “referee” boss waits for the mistake to call a penalty and tell employees what they should have done instead. The coach helps the employee achieve success, while the referee waits to call a foul (see “Are You a Coach or a Referee?”).



Of course, supervisors have to coach employees if they make mistakes, but they shouldn’t be waiting for an error to occur. While it is a lot easier to see a mistake and correct it, people learn more through success than through failure, so bosses should ensure that employees are experiencing as many successes as possible. Successful employees lead to a more successful organization.

## Get Ahead of the Game

The average NFL coach works 80 hours a week combining on-the-field skill practice, drills, and one-on-one sessions, and begins preparing for the season months in advance. Winning coaches don’t wait to see what happens on the field on game day—they begin preparing players for passing scenarios and defense strategies that could present themselves during a game, so they are armed with a strategy to succeed in the situation.

Bosses need to approach coaching opportunities like they are preparing for a game every day, coaching on client interactions, presentation content, or negotiation skills on an ongoing basis. While this may require more time and attention on the front end, the boss will spend less time solving problems and reacting after a task is complete.

## A Stronger Offense

So how do managers become proactive coaches? First, they have to know employees well enough to understand their strengths and weaknesses and how to challenge them with new assignments.

Bosses need to be good at observing and tracking performance to identify the areas where employees may need assistance. They should also be looking out for new and challenging situations and responsibilities that workers are

about to tackle.

Open the dialogue by inquiring how the individual intends to handle the task, and then discuss the plan together. Be sure that, while she receives your input, she also feels like she owns the task and is responsible for the outcome and the resulting success.

Once the project is off the ground, check in regularly to be sure the person has the resources she needs and is making progress against the goal. Then catch her doing something right, instead of doing something wrong, and tell her about her success. ■

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## ARE YOU A COACH OR A REFEREE?

Answer true or false to each question.

- My employees learn more from navigating a task by themselves, so I stay out of their way.
- There is no time to meet with people before every task, so I wait for them to come to me for help.
- I always assign people tasks that I know they can handle without my assistance.
- I meet with people once, tell them how they should handle the task, and then let them handle it. They’ll come see me if they need more information.
- It’s better to let people make a mistake—they’ll never make the same one twice.

If you answered “true” to any of these, you are at risk of becoming—or may already be—a referee boss. You can become a coach by proactively working with members of your team to identify challenging new tasks and help them create a plan that will lead to a successful end result.